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## **A HOME IN THE WORLD?**

*Remarks on India and the Future*

By Ralph Peters

### **Executive Summary:**

India will not become a superpower in our lifetimes, nor will it soon become the limitless market for consumer goods of which multinational corporations dream. Plagued by immeasurable corruption and woefully deficient in infrastructure, it will disappoint many (though not all) foreign investors, while continuing to lag far behind less self-satisfied and better-integrated developing economies, such as China and Mexico. India will occasionally startle us with its progress in narrow areas, while the bulk of its population struggles on in poverty or near-poverty. Its role in the world will continue to be that of a regional power--capable of sparring with its neighbors, but unable to operate globally.

Incapable of excellence, India has a genius for muddling through. Doomsayers consistently have been proven wrong, just as optimists have always suffered disappointment in their hopes for India. Rational expectations, always in short supply, are the key to dealing successfully with India and its inefficient, tenacious government, which substitutes lofty rhetoric for meaningful responsibility to the people.

The survival of Indian democracy is remarkable, but the quality of that democracy is remarkably bad. Embodying all of the popular vices against which bygone British theorists and America's early practitioners warned, Indian

democracy represents the people without serving them. Unfair and often criminal, it is democracy without civic responsiveness, ethical backbone, transparency or adequate accountability. And yet, it offers a better form of government than that of any state on its borders.

Democratic India is our natural ally in the region, but it will not be a comfortable one for at least the next decade--primarily due to Indian vanity, suspicion and lack of perspective. India's government is one of insatiable appetites and inadequate resources--a situation exacerbated by half a century of wrongheaded economic policies. The socialist and nationalist rhetoric of demagogic politicians continues to hamper constructive change. Religious animosities, always a dependable source of violence in India, are intensifying again (consistent with the global resurgence of fundamentalism) and will continue to lead to localized bloodlettings ignored abroad. The state's existence is not threatened--but it may not be strong enough to transform itself, either. Like all large, weak states, India mistakes the size of its population--a liability--for real power.

The number one impediment to development in India is corruption, which touches nearly every sphere of life and virtually all lives. Endemic corruption of the Indian variety stymies economic and social progress--already impeded by the well-meant, horribly-destructive legacy of the socialist programs embraced by independent India's founding generation and brandished today by selfish--and successful--politicians. Efforts to liberalize the economy over the past decade have made demonstrable headway, but those efforts remain inadequate to bring India fully into the twentieth, let alone the twenty-first, century. Despite adamant opposition from corrupt politicians, unions, nationalists and native industrialists who have profited from protectionism, economic reforms will continue--they are unavoidable--but they will not keep pace with either the needs of the nation or the demands of the global economy. India *will* make progress, but only fitfully and ever insufficiently.

India is a prisoner of its own myths. Loud, dishonest and hollow, it is an Al Sharpton among nations. Unwilling to die and be gone, the lingering romance of socialism still convinces a majority of Indians that neo-colonial multinational corporations are panting at the border, conspiring to ravish India and make off with its (rather well-disguised) riches, and that foreign investors are all devils. Contrary to popular perceptions, foreign direct investment in India is actually declining, having peaked in 1997 at a comparatively low total of \$3.6 billion (the year 2000's total was \$2.1 billion, less than the recently-approved budget of Fairfax County, Virginia). Whether the crippling tendency to blame India's current problems on long-gone colonial powers and, when that fails, on the West as exemplified by the United States, or an over-estimation of India's global importance--based on ignorance of the greater world--India's inability to deal with empirical reality is as self-defeating as it is comforting to the unsuccessful. And this embrace of myth over reality, although not uncommon in underdeveloped societies, is especially ironic in a country where reality is so immediate, so brutal, and so uncompromising.

Strategically, India faces both external and internal threats. Dramatically outpacing India in developing the components of power, China yearns southward and is already heavily, perhaps decisively, engaged in Burma/Myanmar. A Chinese-Indian clash in the Bay of Bengal is a marked possibility in the out-years. Were such an encounter to occur, India's "home-court advantage" would be undercut by its squandering of scarce resources on its visually-gratifying, incompetent navy--a trophy from yesteryear's strategic wishlist--rather than on long-range air power and precision weapons. Since China's inability to sustain power projection will continue for decades, any future encounter with China may be operationally humiliating for India, but would not be strategically decisive, and the struggle for regional hegemony would fester on.

While it might appear useful for the U.S. to bolster India as a regional counterweight to China, India is, at present, insufficiently mature and self-aware for a healthy alliance with the U.S. It would be a grave error for the United States to press too hard for strengthened military and strategic ties with New Delhi--any such ties must develop "organically"--largely from Indian initiatives and perceived needs--or they will lead only to misapprehension, wasted efforts and resentment. While we may welcome cooperation with India, India must set the pace for now. Too hasty an attempt at strategic partnership between the U.S. and India would bring only disappointment. We must allow India's appetite for closer relations to develop on its own, rather than trying to force-feed New Delhi. The long-term prospect for an India-U.S. partnership, should India make the correct developmental decisions, is very good. For now, we must manage our relations quietly, conservatively and patiently, with as little public display as possible. In most instances, it will be most advantageous to let the flag follow trade, rather than the other way around.

Pakistan is a fragile, eruptive state--riven by exemplary stresses--whose current leadership is misunderstood by the West and probably the best hope to keep that country from disintegration. While leaders on both sides of the Indo-Pakistani borders take pains to assure the world of their rationality, the chances of these states blundering into a nuclear exchange, sparked either by an outburst of nationalist temperament or desperation, are worryingly high. Should the Musharraf government in Islamabad fall, New Delhi may face a number of nightmare scenarios. In a war, nuclear or non-nuclear, the Indian military would win (again), but given the volatile condition of every country between the Persian Gulf and the Indian border, any such war might have a serial effect that further destabilizes the center of the continent--where religious, racial, ethnic, cultural and economic differences collide.

An additional challenge for India is growing ethnic nationalism in Southeast Asian and Pacific states with substantial emigre-Indian populations. Recent anti-Indian rioting in Malaysia may prove a foretaste of worse to come. A significant massacre or ethnic cleansing of Indians abroad would spark popular demands for government action, which would likely lead to the fall of the government then in power, since India lacks the means to respond, except in contiguous states (or Sri Lanka, where it already has gotten not only its fingers, but its forearms burned).

Internally, the Kashmir problem has no evident solution--at least not one acceptable to all the players. Even were a plebiscite to be held, freely and fairly, India's clumsy handling of the situation over the past decade has polarized the population and given extremists a grip that more enlightened policies would have denied them. Rationally, good arguments can be made for a plebiscite on Kashmir's future, despite the inevitability of rejectionist behavior by extremists, but India is afraid of unleashing a separatist chain reaction elsewhere within its borders.

The U.S. must not allow itself to become involved in attempts to broker peace in Kashmir, since the inevitable result would be factional and extremist bitterness toward us from every side, no matter the sincerity of our efforts. We have nothing to gain by touching the Kashmir issue, and much to lose. Even if the United Nations or any other agency were able to broker a promising truce and apparent solution (which is highly unlikely), the U.S. should avoid any manpower contribution even to observer elements, since American personnel would automatically become the focus of any extremist actions sponsored by either camp. Frustratingly, we do "have a dog in that fight," since peace in the region favors our interests. But we must recognize that our means do not match our desires. The only level at which we can play a constructive role--and that must be taken on cautiously--is by the application of personalized strategic pressure to defuse threats of cross-border hostilities between India and Pakistan in times of crisis. But we must not allow ourselves to be engaged irrevocably and must be ready to stand aside and allow implacable enemies to learn their own lessons. Our impulse to do something must be tempered by an understanding of what is--and isn't--doable.

Kashmir is not the only bit of Indian territory unhappy with New Delhi's rule: from ongoing separatist violence in the northeast to lingering resentment in the south against the Hindi-speaking majority and its attempt to assert political and cultural hegemony, India is less well-integrated than outsiders usually realize. Some major and a number of minor states were forcibly integrated into India in the early years of independence, and not all of the residents have forgotten it. With eighteen major languages spoken--none universally, although English binds the intelligentsia--and pronounced ethnic and cultural differences, the Indian government must always go carefully in its approach to federalism, the result of which is a neo-feudal variance between states that ranges from the progressive and hopeful (predominantly in the south) to the thoroughly criminal and bitterly impoverished (largely in the north).

And yet...having had the chance to observe India from north to south, I am guardedly optimistic about its future.

First, India certainly will survive, probably within its current boundaries. Sectors of the Indian economy and of its society will prosper--although leaving many, if not most, Indians behind for the foreseeable future. Trickle-down economics work--and India has already seen some results from initial economic liberalizations--but the scope of the country's problems is so vast that, even should the central government make every possible correct decision on the economic front, it will be decades before India hits the critical mass of wealth needed to

guarantee most of its citizens even a modestly-decent standard of living. India has made admirable strides since independence--but they remain sadly inadequate.

Above all, India *does* possess wealth--not under its soil or even under its mattresses (where gold-hoarding still persists on a massive scale, due to the corrupt nature of the banking and securities systems), but in its people. It isn't the sheer numbers--over a billion and counting--that constitute the nation's potential; indeed, in this case numbers are a weakness, not a strength, burdening every social program and effort at reform. Rather, this is a population stymied by disastrous economic planning, by a bureaucratic genius for corruption, by monstrous social prejudices, by ill-health and poverty--yet it is also a reservoir of immense human potential, seething with pent-up talent. Given the opportunity, talent and ambition generate wealth and well-being. If it wishes to accelerate development, the Indian government's immediate challenge is to unleash the human potential of its citizens. This will be difficult--especially since many of those in positions of power are perfectly content with things as they are and fear change (they would rather see young, discontented Indians emigrate than pursue reforms that would keep their talents at home). But, if India wants to compete in this transformed and constantly-self-transforming world, it must recognize that human potential--currently wasted to an unforgivable degree--is the state's single greatest asset.

In the meantime, the United States will continue to profit from the immigration of India's best and brightest--the cream of a billion--while India staggers forward, a paragon of inequality, making ever less progress than it could and remaining less than the sum of its heartbreaking parts.

*Drafter's note:*

*This report does not pretend to be scholarly or comprehensive. It is not the work of an India expert. Although I have enjoyed a lifelong, casual interest in India, this report is the immediate result of personal observation during a recent opportunity to visit India. I have avoided government officials and their unhelpful views, either in India or in the United States, and purposely have not interviewed any academic "authorities" on the subject. I spoke to average Indians, at home and abroad, telling no one I was doing a report, since I did not want them to self-censor their comments. I claim no wisdom and have simply tried to understand, in a global context, that which I saw and heard and sensed and cannot forget.*

## **1. A FEW BASIC PROBLEMS**

*A Corruption Primer*

A finely-educated, intelligent and articulate young Indian woman from a privileged family, who currently works in the Information Technology (IT) sector in the Washington, D.C. area, responded to my question about corruption in India as follows:

"Oh, all the corruption isn't really a problem. It's just a different system than here. Everybody knows how much has to be paid to get things done, so businessmen just factor it into their expenses. It isn't really a problem at all."

But it *is* a problem. Representative of the top institutions of the over-rated (in the West) Indian system of education, the young woman's knowledge was deep in her own field, but shallow-to-nonexistent elsewhere. Like most Indians, she had no grasp of applied economics (Indian scholars have managed to win international prizes in the field of economics, a dependable sign of mistaken views). Corruption is a form of dystrophy that afflicts states, crippling their ability to walk forward, let alone run. Untreated, it reduces them to scuttling, tormented things.

Corruption is not just a matter of handing over an envelope stuffed with banknotes. In many respects, that's the least of it. It is the reverberant, pervasive effects of corruption that stymie development. Ingrained corruption does the following:

*--Undermines public trust in the law, the state and the financial system, demoralizing the population.*

*--Cripples the taxation system and provokes mass deception.*

*--Weakens financial institutions and instruments, provoking "average" citizens to hoard precious metals (dead money that does not contribute to development) and driving high-income individuals to invest off-shore, launder assets, and value property ownership over entrepreneurial risk. Corruption prevents the natural and efficient allocation of resources within an economy.*

*--Favors large firms and fosters state-backed or state-licensed monopolies, hampering competition and industrial evolution.*

*--Impedes free trade, domestically and between nations, further reducing efficiency, consumer choice and the achievement of quality.*

*--Favors nepotism over merit, wasting the nation's talent and, often, driving the most capable performers abroad.*

*--Weakens currencies and the state's fiscal architecture.*

*--Deters or delays crucial foreign investment; post-investment, corruption leads to capital flight and, often, to embittered disengagement.*

*--Prevents the effective costing essential to a modern economy.*

*--Skews statistics vital to governmental decision-making.*

*--Inflates the man-hour costs of production.*

*--Not least, corruption degrades the lives of a state's citizens and undercuts respect for the state across the board, creating an atmosphere of distrust and fear. The intelligentsia disengages from practical matters, while the common man's ambitions are perverted.*

This list is far from exhaustive. In a state such as India, corruption taints the educational system, where bribes and threats are common, the medical system, and even, as the recent tehelka.com scandal demonstrated, the military. But perhaps the most pernicious effect is the general erosion of public trust and confidence. In India, one often hears about the ability of the people to cooperate--and they do, in traffic jams and in crises--but this topical cooperation masks a deep molecularization of Indian society.

It is a commonplace (thus assuredly wrong) that the breakdown of the big, old-fashioned family is one of contemporary America's weaknesses and a significant social loss. In fact, the modern American nuclear family is a ferocious economic tool, allowing for levels of mobility and efficiency without historical precedent. The breakdown of the extended family is a great American advantage (the parts of the United States where the extended family continues to exert the strongest hold remain the most backward, economically, educationally and socially). And for all the whining to which our fellow citizen's are given, American expectations of government are extremely high--we may insist we don't trust politicians, but we damned well expect the rule of law, good highways, safe food, dependable utilities (note the furor over California's power difficulties), safety regulations, safety nets, etc. ad infinitum. We do not expect corruption and when it occurs it outrages us, and we insist that it be punished. To a subtle but powerful degree, modern Americans have come to depend upon the state-they-love-to-hate to provide much that, in past centuries, extended families provided, from food to physical protection and a secure retirement, and the notion that a bribe should be paid anywhere along the way is as foreign to the American psyche as self-discipline at meal time. The combination of the mobile, mutable nuclear family and trustworthy government makes for stunning economic effectiveness.

India is much the reverse. The routine inefficacy, and intermittent malignity, of government reinforces the importance of the extended family and other unofficial networks. By no means unique to India, this model prevails in underdeveloped states around the world--the family becomes the fortress. But if the family provides a safety net, it often sets up prison bars, as well. Developed economies and successful states run on trust to a remarkable degree. In India, the level of trust in extra-familial institutions is very low. At its least menacing, this means the cousin gets hired first. But it also means that individuals are willing to assume little risk--that indispensable engine of progress and profit. India consumes a disproportionate amount of gold, because hundreds of millions of Indians still put

any money they can spare into gold and jewelry--good news for jewelers, but not for an economy woefully short of investment capital. Indians do not trust beyond the family, and corruption is at the root of it. Yet, a modern (or post-modern) state cannot prosper without a high degree of civic, public and (extra-familial) personal trust. The citizen who is constantly looking over his shoulder is not looking toward the future.

Some of the obstacles to cleaning up India's corruption are all too obvious. Above all, the scope and pervasiveness make the task seem nearly impossible. Then come the obvious vested interests, from powerful politicians who grow rich (without the bother of writing books after they leave office), down to local policemen who could not make ends meet without pocketing bribes. But the real knife-fighting against any reform efforts will come from those behind the curtain, from criminals to industrialists. For the criminal, there is no better guarantee of safety than a corrupt system that makes authority complicit (and over a hundred members of the Indian national parliament either have criminal pasts, stand accused, or are under investigation), while for the well-positioned industrialist or businessman it is far easier to maintain market share in a corrupt, non-competitive, licensed environment than in a free market. University professors who expect tips for high marks are no more likely to protest against corruption than are the leaders of student mafias funded by political gangsters. Indians complain about corruption, but few of those who profit from the system want to relinquish their share in it.

Businessmen considering investments in India should be especially cognizant of the pervasive corruption in India's stock and securities markets. Recently, corruption scandals have rocked the bellweather Bombay/Mumbai stock market and, in March of this year (2001), corrupt trading practices so devastated the Calcutta stock exchange that the governing agency may have to sell its building to address its debts. This matters internally, of course, since stock and securities markets are by far the most efficient way to allocate resources to corporations in a modern (or post-modern) economy and corruption in the markets stymies growth and curtails broader investment. But it also matters to foreign corporations considering India as a place to do business. The integrity of stock markets may be one of the most effective measures of the level of development of an economy--and of its growth potential. As investors in Russia have already learned, FDI cannot be protected from the manipulation of the local stock market. To cite Mexico again, where the stock market has been "learning constitutionality," general growth potential increases as corruption declines. India is still expanding the possibilities of corruption--a level of development that should make international investors very cautious.

Battling corruption is crucial to overcoming India's many inequities, as well as to attracting (and retaining) desperately needed foreign investment--or simply freeing up for constructive use the wealth which Indian citizens possess but conceal. Corruption reduction is essential to building a level of trust in the state and its representatives requisite to broad modernization. Finally, attacking corruption is vital to fostering, unleashing and retaining India's human capital.

### *Corruption and the Myth of Return*

Before I left for India, I was asked to consider whether or not the omnipresence of Indian software writers might constitute a strategic threat, raising the possibility of a hi-tech Pearl Harbor or a crippling embargo along the lines of OPEC's tantrums of the nineteen-seventies.

Unlikely, if not impossible.

First, the ability to write software is not a finite, geographically-restricted resource. For a number of reasons (which will be discussed later in this report), Indians have proven markedly adept at developing IT skills; further, Indian IT entrepreneurs, freed from India's oppressive system, have flourished in the United States--as other immigrant groups have done before in other fields. But should Indians alienate foreign employers with threats, or merely over-price their services, others will rise to the incentive and take their places.

Second, although virtually all immigrant groups cherish a myth of return, arriving on our shores with the notion that they will prosper then go "home," as time goes by America spoils them. The opportunities, comforts, safety, wealth and future potential in the United States seduce Indians (as they have done so many others previously), and their loyalties shift. If you ask an Indian working in America what he or she misses about India, the instant response is "Family," not corruption, pollution, prejudice, crime, bad government, poor health care or any of the other joys of life in India today. And "family" is the same response you would have gotten from a Swede, or a Scot, or a German, or an Irishman a century and a half ago--later generations romanticize the old sod. At present, Indians holding H-1B work visas are pulling out all the stops to remain in the United States--and to become citizens.

Sometimes unaware of it themselves, these latest immigrants are becoming model Americans--and extremely valuable ones on a per capita basis. In an unlikely crisis between India and the United States, many would feel torn, but few would be likely to betray this country--and kill the goose that laid the golden egg. They might feel some inevitable nostalgia for India, but not for the Indian government. Like the ancestors on the German side of my own family confronted by the Great War, they might have regrets, but most would recognize what America has given them and their families--and choose sides accordingly. Beyond our own national myths and rhetoric, nothing makes immigrants good Americans like material success.

Third, even Indians working on IT projects in India would have a mixed reaction to any government call for work stoppages. While Indians often are very (and defensively) nationalistic, they also have a healthy mistrust of New Delhi. Few IT employees would want to risk their--rare--good jobs and relatively high incomes unless India were actively and obviously threatened. Indians are far too anarchic for such an action to work well.

Fourth, any such action on the part of the Indian government would destroy the hi-tech industry in India. GE, Microsoft, Hewlett-Packard, Siemens and the many other Western firms that have established satellites in India would leave. For good. Oil companies have to go where the oil is. IT is the most mobile major industry in history. Even Indian politicians are likely to figure this out.

Fifth, in a crisis, one serious danger would be from India-based hackers--but this, too, could prove counterproductive. Despite all the ballyhoo about the brilliance of the Indian workforce (which would not look quite so brilliant to Western corporations were its wage levels equal to those in California), it's important to keep sight of the fact that India needs the West and foreign direct investment (FDI) far, far more than the West needs anything India has to offer. We must make certain that Indian decision-makers always understand that. The threat to pull out of India is more vital than any threat India could bring to bear.

Any potential enemy of the United States should understand that IT sabotage will result in ferocious retaliation and an insistence upon reparations--neglect of a publicized policy by our own government is the real weakness here, not young Indians desperately hungry for decent jobs. Certainly, the possibility of "trap doors" built into software programs by any foreign entity should concern us--but we often worry so much about our minor weaknesses that we blind ourselves to our enormous strengths. And anyone concerned about a "software Pearl Harbor" should recall what happened in the wake of December 7th, 1941. Expensive though the losses might be, IT attacks will not be decisive for the imaginable future--and any tactical or even operational advantages an opponent might gain from such activities would prove devastatingly counter-productive in the longer term.

There is, in fact, a hidden danger in its hi-tech fortunes for India. While IT operations will continue to expand in India for the foreseeable future, this is an industry where skills can swiftly become obsolete and requirements are always changing. Foreign investors could write off those (shoddily-built) offices in Bangalore and Hyderabad without blinking. One aspect of the danger is that India's IT boomlet (for such it is, in fact) may repeat the pattern of many export booms throughout history, such as Latin America's silver, tin and beef booms, which enriched countries sufficiently to raise their expectations, only to leave them abruptly impoverished again and fiscally over-extended. India could be "ambushed" by rising wages and costs that eventually make it more profitable to operate elsewhere, by competition from foreign innovators, or even by technological developments as IT systems become increasingly self-correcting then self-generating. Just as it seemed, not long ago, that we could not possibly do without Japanese transistors (who now recalls that great threat to our national security?), our "dependence" on Indian IT personnel may wither in time. Should India fail to diversify as it develops, the vulnerability will be its own, not ours.

My strong personal feeling regarding this issue is that there is an undertone of racism in the notion of Indians suddenly playing havoc with the West's software needs--a variation of the old "Yellow Peril" theme. If anything, the United States should be rushing to welcome Indian professionals to our shores, dramatically expanding the number of H-1B work visas granted each year and lowering the

hurdles to obtaining green cards then becoming citizens for educated, skilled immigrants from the sub-continent. I cannot stress sufficiently that, thanks to India's deficiencies, we are skimming off the cream of a billion people. These workers and immigrants are making an enormous contribution to the United States, not threatening it in any way. If we continue restricting such desirable human beings from becoming Americans, while pretending an Indian software genius is stealing a job from a disgruntled, semi-literate, blue-collar union member in Indiana, we are doing ourselves a greater self-injury than any Indian IT embargo could ever do. Indian immigrants are proving to be one of the most valuable groups of immigrants per capita in American history--here they can unleash their pent-up talents and admirable will to work and be handsomely rewarded for it--and they, in turn, demonstrate a gratitude and loyalty to this country and its communities that many native-born Americans would do well to emulate. With rare exceptions, we haven't even paid for their educations. This is a free lunch for America. We ought to stuff ourselves.

Nor need we wring our hands over "robbing" talent from a country that needs it. India neglects the talents and needs of its youth once they have been educated (more on this below). It is not in human nature to want to leave homeland and family behind, and the overwhelming majority of human beings will gladly accept lesser opportunities at home over greater ones abroad. But there must be some opportunities at home. Partly because of poverty, but largely through political stasis and the self-satisfaction of the political class, India fails to provide those opportunities. Longstanding emigration of the most capable, far pre-dating the current wave of emigration to the U.S., has served as a safety valve for India's feudal democracy, effectively exiling those likeliest to demand change; although impossible to quantify, this emigration may have had a much more profound effect over the decades than the oft-cited blue-collar migration to the U.S. that has helped keep Mexico stable. Certainly, no Indian government since independence has welcomed political participation by overseas Indians, and recent governments have taken pains to prevent it. New Delhi and the panoply of state governments are delighted by remittances from abroad, but want no truck with foreign notions of probity, accountability, responsibility and simple decency. The consistent attitude of India's governments toward its packed-off citizens has been "Good riddance, send money."

Governments and societies get what they deserve.

### *Socialism and Self-Sufficiency--More Myths*

Luck and timing are at least as important to the fate of nations as they are to individuals. India had bad luck in the men who shaped the new nation's policies--though vital to gaining independence, those men sapped the new state's vitality after independence had been achieved. India had even worse luck in the timing of the independence movement itself, the rise of which was exactly contemporary

with the vogue for socialism, and in its sudden escape from colonialism, which occurred just as socialism, reinforced by Keynesian misapprehensions, appeared to be a workable alternative to the "inhumanity" of capitalism.

As even movie fans know, Gandhi was the indispensable man of India's independence movement. He is now so enshrined in ennobling myth that it is unlikely we shall ever see him clearly. Nor can it be denied that he was brilliant, heroic, capable and canny. He also had a genius for the grand gesture, a flair for propaganda, an instinct for his opponent's weaknesses and the skills of a confidence man. Sainly and dishonest, he was a man for whom words were instruments to be used, not vessels of truth.

The classic example of Gandhi's disingenuousness is an exchange which occurred during the independence struggle, when he was asked what he thought of Western civilization. He replied, "I think it would be a good idea." Gandhi knew his reply was nonsense, of course--but he was never interested in applying the same fairness to his own actions that he demanded from his British interlocutors. He routinely exploited the civilized nature of the colonial power, aware of the scrupulous nature of British law, of British decency and self-restraint--of Britain's humanity, however grudging it sometimes may have been. Gandhi's crusading manner and non-violent campaign only could work against a power that was very civilized, indeed, and he knew it (he wouldn't have fared so well against Japan, Russia or Belgium). He understood his enemy, and turned his enemy's strengths into weaknesses. An early master of the sound bite and a man shaped by that "non-existent" Western Civilization, Gandhi was struggling for the independence of a land even he recognized as brutal and bigoted--a land whose independence would be christened with the blood of perhaps a million of its own citizens over confessional differences, then with his own assassination by a fellow Hindu who felt Gandhi was too soft on India's Muslims.

Gandhi was a great man. Of that there can be no question. But he was also eccentric (perhaps a requirement of true greatness) and, unfortunately for India, he had no sense of how the practical world works--especially in the sphere of business, markets, industry, trade and general economics. He was a romantic, a wonderfully inspiring one. His national vision was of a self-sufficient India of village crafts, an early version of a hippie paradise (but without well-off parents to police up the damage when things went wrong). While he was not an avowed socialist, his teachings lent themselves easily to socialist interpretations--and he was surrounded at the center of the independence movement by brilliant, unworldly intellectuals (of the sort the British could not quite bring themselves to hang), a majority of whom were poisoned by the seductive rhetoric and easy promises of reading-room socialism.

The Indian National Congress, parent of the independence movement and grandparent of today's Congress party in India, was founded in 1885, but grew into full maturity in the 1920s and 1930s, those heady years when socialism (and communism) seemed not only possible, but triumphant. It was an age of intense religious fervor and intoxication that substituted socialism and communism for God, an age of willfully-blind, impassioned, sacrificial belief. Suddenly, for a movement struggling against a pre-eminent Western power, there was a theoretical

alternative to capitalism and even an alternative practical model--the striving, inspiring, "humane" Soviet Union.

Jawaharlal Nehru, independent India's first and most influential prime minister, was Gandhi's crown-prince. And although he was reluctant to call himself a socialist, the Cambridge-educated Nehru bought into the Soviet model and the promises of socialism uncritically, as only an intellectual could do. It was the fashion of the times, and free India (with a few dissenting voices) embraced socialism with conviction. Nehru was a selfless, good-hearted, utterly-well-meaning man, but he was a patrician dreamer who pitied his fellow countrymen without possessing the least grasp of human nature--a fatal combination for a national leader.

After independence, famously gained at the stroke of midnight on August 15th, 1947, India embarked upon a series of five-year plans, of state control of the "commanding heights" of industry and of most of the valleys, too, of intended self-sufficiency and the belief that government always knew best. Spurning the West and the perceived cruelties of capitalism, Nehru was soon tangling with the United States (just when we were at our most impatient and intolerant, thanks to the Cold War) and had snuggled so close to the Communist states that he managed to--very publicly--rationalize away the Chinese intervention in Korea and come down on the Stalinist side of other East-West issues, driving an unnecessary and counter-productive wedge between India and the United States that endures to this day. To be fair, John Foster Dulles didn't help matters on our side, but Nehru had an absolute, unsullied genius for backing history's wrong horses.

A dreadful combination of central-planning, restrictions on private industry, the goal of autarchy, an emphasis on heavy industry at the top and handicrafts at the bottom--neglecting the vital middle sectors of the economy--an emphasis on worker protection rather than job creation, all mixed up in an impoverished country, sidetracked India's economic development for nearly half a century. Only in the last decade did India--eyes forced part-way open--begin to liberalize its economy. Today, each effort to expose another industry to competition, to cooperate with multinationals, or to open a sphere to foreign investment (and scrupulous accounting), or to rationalize bankrupt state-owned enterprises meets with howls, strikes and, often, violence. Even contract law, that foundation stone of the rise of the West, appears undependable. The way ahead is not going to be easy.

Socialism corrupts. The more socialism a country endures, the more it is corrupted. By ignoring human nature--greed, acquisitiveness, jealousy, sloth and the unfair distribution of talent--socialism drives these attributes underground where they fester and swell, humanity's sewer gas. Historically, India was never a rule-of-law society until the high colonial era (even then the law did not reach all), and corruption was already deeply-embedded before the British came. It was still there when the British left (although the British gave India the most honest and painstaking, if often oblivious, government it has ever had). The state policies of independent India achieved their greatest success in expanding corruption. The only true production success has been a result of the green revolution developed offshore. India can now feed itself--and that is important progress, to be sure. But

it still feeds itself hand-to-mouth, and remains precariously dependent upon nature's whims. And with agriculture accounting for almost a third of GDP, the failure of other sectors to develop adequately increases the state's economic vulnerability. At present, serious drought threatens various parts of the country; while none may starve, the economic effects of further rainless monsoon seasons could be severe.

In every other historically-significant sector, independent India has suffered either from direct state control or the "permit license raj." Essentially, businessmen who had or could buy influence were able to exploit the socialist structures of the system to gain exclusive licenses to produce capital goods and consumer products. And even these licenses restricted as they permitted--only so many automobiles or appliances might be produced, no matter what the actual demand. Of course, shortages arose, even as quality languished. A handful of families, such as the Tatas, Birlas and others, were able to prosper remarkably, to the extent that their names are omnipresent on Indian goods to a degree far surpassing anything achieved in the West even in the heyday of Ford. Yet, these families are respected in economically-naive India, since they built a planetarium here or established a charitable foundation there as "gifts to the nation." But no amount of belated charitable giving could compensate for the damage these families and others have done to India--it cannot be measured only in the vast wealth they have accumulated, but would have to be judged against the potential wealth that was never created, due to the system they so long enjoyed. Even today, the great dynasties are doing very well, since they've managed to arrange for liberalization to require that virtually all foreign investors need Indian partners, both practically and in law. The little guy still doesn't have a chance.

I know of no other country where the squandered opportunities for development are so heartbreaking.

In March, 2001, the Hong Kong-based *Political and Economic Risk Consultancy* rated Asian states for corruption, based upon input from 700 international businessmen. A score of ten meant maximum corruption, a score of one an ethical paradise. India was rated at 9.25, its corruption level exceeded only by Vietnam and disintegrating Indonesia (Singapore was judged the least-corrupt Asian state). Like the bygone Soviet Union, which it resembles in many ways, India has a wonderful constitution that the government, and everybody else, ignores.

In a world where investment dollars can go almost anywhere their owners choose, this matters. In fact, despite the Western image of an investment boom in India, FDI is declining at present--and may soon plummet, if India's state and national governments continue to cheat the foreign investors they so desperately need.

*And You Think California's got Problems...*

In order to become a competitive economy, India--geographically huge--would require an upgrade of its infrastructure on so massive a scale that it simply is not fundable. India can only improve in bits and pieces, here and there. Meanwhile, as it struggles to liberalize its economy and develop itself, it suffers from a limited, very-poor road network (national highways are, at best, ill-maintained two-lane blacktops and, despite the glories of IT, even computers still have to be physically delivered); antiquated and inadequate port facilities; a weak communications infrastructure; a rail network that has degenerated since independence and has only a limited capacity to haul bulk cargo; inefficient, polluting, energy-gobbling industries; and a woefully-overtaxed power grid.

In the 1990s, the populous, energy-hungry state of Maharashtra, with New Delhi's support and finance-ministry guarantees, negotiated a massive deal with the multinational Enron Corporation to develop power plants. It seemed a great, liberalizing breakthrough for India, and the phased project promised to turn Maharashtra into an energy exporter in time. The state and the Center (the Indian term for the New Delhi government) offered standard assurances to Enron, the contracts were signed, and all parties professed their pleasure at the achievement.

Today, with a plant on-line at Dabhol, the state of Maharashtra insists that the power provided is too expensive and the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) refuses to pay its debts to Enron, including a \$47 million tab for power consumed last December and January. Worse, the MSEB insists that the contract should be renegotiated (for the second time) and has filed a spurious suit claiming \$86 million in damages from Enron for a technical violation of the existing contract (electricity generation supposedly did not increase swiftly enough to meet a surge in demand one day last winter). New Delhi, the co-signer, is looking for an exit strategy and stalling on its own obligations. Far from dealing in good faith, the Indians have made fiery public accusations against Enron (now that the plant is built and functioning), stirring up nationalist fervor over the supposed depredations of multinational corporations.

Enron acknowledges cost fluctuations, but insists that prices are in line with those elsewhere, since energy is a volatile sector. Everything done by Enron appears to have been in accordance with the contract, which imposed no unusual or onerous conditions on India. Meanwhile, a three-billion-dollar project which India needs desperately is in trouble, involving, behind Enron and the Dabhol Power Co., Bechtel Corporation and General Electric, among others--not the sort of players India can afford to stiff. At present, the painfully-negotiated construction of a wide array of desperately-needed, power-related facilities, to be funded by various sources of FDI, is on hold throughout India, with offshore investors spooked and looking elsewhere for opportunities. As of this writing

(April, 2001), Enron reportedly is considering shutting down its operations in India and walking away (its profits elsewhere can cover the write-off easily). As a minimum, it appears the corporation will accept a discounted buy-out, if one is offered, with no intention of returning to India in the future. Since Enron Corporation--a huge enterprise--is based in Texas, a state whose native sons take a particular interest in energy matters, India may be digging itself an even deeper hole than it realizes.

The heart of the problem is that India still remembers the heyday of the non-aligned movement (Nehru's pet project) and subsidized oil from OPEC states (today they want market rates). India has long subsidized power for consumers, leaving a scale of rates that can bill industry ten times what private consumers are billed--while a large portion of electric power is simply siphoned off illegally. Walk down an Indian side street and look up--the tangle of wires is such a mess of spaghetti that you will immediately understand how Indians can deal with the complexities of software. For politicians, it is much easier to blame the dependable multinational bogeyman than to get the local house in order, and the Enron case has led to an explosion of crude nationalism guaranteed to make foreign businessmen pack their bags.

Recently, the U.S. ambassador warned the New Delhi government that any attempt to force a renegotiation of the Enron contract would convince foreign investors that their funds are safer in China or Malaysia. This is not business as usual: when an ambassador actually says something of substance, matters are serious, indeed.

### *Why We Misjudge India*

We misjudge India because we want to. It really is that simple. Foreign policy "experts" and strategists desperately want something dynamic to worry about, while businessmen are always hungry for the next big thing. In a world of smallish, annoying threats, we long for big players to emerge and give us something serious to do. And diplomats, businessmen and investors, with their susceptibility to gold-rush fever, never learn their lessons for very long.

On the economic side, we've been here before, many times. Recently, newly-free Russia was going to be an investor's paradise (and it had only one hundred and fifty million impoverished people). Set the WayBack for the early nineties and you can read rosy prognoses in the best financial pages about Russia's glorious future. Westerners (businesses and governments) threw money at Russia, fattening corrupt Russian insiders, but not their own portfolios--and only inflating Russian greed and Moscow's sense of importance and entitlement. Now Russia's in the doghouse, where it always belonged. We need a new big thing.

Actually, India does have far more potential and, I believe, a much brighter future than Russia, which is in a decline that cannot be arrested, despite statistics

showing economic growth (growth from what base, after all?). Russia lived on credit--human, natural resource, ecological--for far too long. It's very geography and climate are enemies. It is ruined.

India only has to make correct decisions, then live by them. But that is very hard, indeed.

We also misjudge India because we see so little of it. Politicians and other privileged visitors flying into New Delhi can be swept down broad boulevards to one of the fine hotels in the new quarter of the city (built by the British and still well-maintained, by India's very low standards), then on to meetings in the grand government buildings designed by Mr. Lutyens as symbols of Britain's "eternal" power in India, followed by a bit of monument-gazing and souvenir shopping, a gala (the Indian government is very good at spectacle) and a smooth trip back to the airport--noting a bit of relatively-mild poverty here and there, but nothing like the fabled misery of which the visitor has heard. Businessmen flying into Bangalore, India's most livable city (see below), can similarly isolate themselves from India's reality. But were any of them to go just a little way off the limousine trail, they would get a very different view of India. Focusing on tiny points of light in the general darkness, they insist, as half a century of visitors before them have done, that it is suddenly dawn in India.

If you want to see India, go where the powerful don't congregate and outsiders haven't invested--which is almost anywhere outside of a handful neighborhoods in a handful of cities. Or just get out of the limo and walk for an hour. There are, as has been noted by others before this, "many Indias." The overwhelming majority of those Indias aren't very appealing or inspiring. And do not make the classic liberal-bigot mistake of applying lower standards to India then judging it condescendingly. The objective measure is Western achievement. Period.

India isn't ruined like Russia, it's just backward and inept. It has a tough climate, but the heat beats Siberia. Despite all the drawbacks I have listed above and will list below, India has a future, not just a past. But the only way to help India develop (and, yes, to profit from that development) is to take off the rose-colored glasses, stop making wild claims without actually visiting India (Bangalore and Hyderabad don't count), and patiently insist on scrupulous fair dealing and strict legality in joint endeavors in India. Don't lower the bar to where Indians would like it--raise it to world standards. India doesn't just need the West--it specifically needs the wealth, know-how and methodologies of the United States. Indians resident in America can form a sturdy bridge. But it all depends on India. We can go elsewhere.

### *Numerology*

The casting of horoscopes, the reading of palms and the deciphering of the cryptic messages hidden in numbers have long, fascinating histories in India. Of these arts, only numerology has managed the transition into a respected modern discipline, now called "statistics." Yet, just as horoscopes sometimes come true, the arcane matter of statistics can be genuinely revealing (although not, of course, to the degree the occult fanatics in our own government insist as they mutter incantations over their charts, tables and surveys). Thus, in a spirit of open-mindedness, this report will take a brief detour into the arcane and cabalistic realm of statistics. Most of those cited are drawn from the enchantment manuals of one of the West's leading alchemical institutions, the World Bank (the horoscope index to this report is available upon special request).

Want to talk about the vast, unstoppable success of India's information technology sector? Its total IT exports in 2000 were four billion dollars (cited in the New York Times, April 1st, 2001). NCR (check-out registers to data storage), a medium-sized U.S.-based corporation, had revenues of 5.9 billion dollars in 2000. Such mid-rank companies as Hershey, Giant Foods (subsidiary of a European multinational), Clorox and Blockbuster each had higher revenues than India received from its vaunted IT sector--and these are hardly America's big economic guns. In the first *quarter* of 2001, GE's revenue was over eight times India's annual revenue from IT.

Certainly four-billion dollars matters--but that sum isn't going to change the fate of India. Nor is India likely to increase those IT exports to the nearly one-hundred-billion dollars per annum it anticipates by the end of the decade. India's pool of trained IT professionals will not be able to keep pace quantitatively or qualitatively with such exponential growth, nor will the country's infrastructure. Although such a boom is not impossible, it is highly unlikely--and such optimistic expectations are dangerous. India will probably be able to continue increasing its IT revenues--but not nearly at the pace for which it hopes.

FDI is, of course, crucial to further IT development. The numbers in that area are revealing. Here are the amounts of FDI for a range of countries in 1998 (the latest year for which complete figures are available). As mentioned above, the current Indian trend is downward. Each country's population is included for general comparison.

<b>Country</b>	<b>FDI in 1998</b>	<b>Population (1998)</b>
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India census)	2.635 billion dollars	1.03 billion (2001
Singapore	7.218 billion dollars	3.2 million
Mexico	10.238 billion dollars	95.8 million
Poland	6.36 billion dollars	44.04 million
China	43.75 billion dollars	1.24 billion

Admittedly, such comparisons are crude--but basic numbers describing how much money is going into a country to be used to generate wealth cross-checked against the number of mouths competing for that wealth suggests that India simply does not have the bright near- to mid-term economic future market-groupies imagine. While it might be argued that the current low level of investment only allows more scope for future development, that's just half a step above trying to argue that poverty is a common good. Development is, of course, a very complex phenomenon, but the basic factors are environment and in-puts. The velocity of development is then determined by cultural factors (though this is still almost a forbidden topic). Certainly, numbers can deceive us--but when disparities are as enormous as in the chart above, they exert a tyranny that cannot easily be overthrown.

In 1999, the GDP of Mexico, whose population is less than one tenth that of India (and which has nearly identical levels of secondary school enrollment, a key determinant for development), was 475 billion dollars--\$15 billion higher than that of India. Further, in four years, Mexico had come from behind to overtake India, despite the setback of the peso crisis. And Mexico is hardly the world's greatest success story (although it appears to be reaching developmental critical mass and is likely to do ever better in the coming decades, thanks to a constellation of factors, from NAFTA to a dramatic change in the national government).

Many Indians will smugly respond that official statistics do not really reflect India's wealth, since as much as 30-40% of the economy is "off the books." First, this figure is probably too high. Second, country's such as Mexico also have significant unofficial economic activity. Third, such activity is far less enriching to a state than are reported transactions, not only because of the unrealized revenue for the government but, even more importantly, because unreported wealth cannot be invested with anything approaching maximum efficiency: income that cannot be "rolled over" into productive investments contributes far less to an economy than legitimate income can, while the corrosive effects of routine illicit business transactions upon an economy are akin to cancer.

Numbers, taken out of context, can deceive us--especially if we only glance at them. In 1999, India reported a growth rate of 6 per cent, which sounds impressive enough. Looking at China's growth rate of 7 per cent for the same year gives an

illusion of near equality--but, again, the issue is 6 or 7 per cent of what? GDP growth of China's increasingly-industrialized trillion-dollar economy is far more powerful than India's six percent of its one-third agricultural 460 billion dollar economy.

And what about levels of poverty? Certainly, since independence, India has made significant progress in reducing poverty and ameliorating its effects; yet, the level from which India began was so low that appalling conditions persist. Also, under India's federal system, individual states often had great latitude in their developmental choices and the results are correspondingly varied:

*--Officially, between 23.3 and 26.1 % of Indians live in poverty.*

*--Punjab has the lowest (best) poverty rate, between 5.3 and 6.2 %.*

*--Orissa has the highest (worst) poverty rate, between 43.4 and 47.2 %.*

*--These official numbers mean that, even by Indian standards, the equivalent of the entire population of the United States falls below the poverty line.*

Yet, even these harsh numbers don't adequately portray the situation. When measuring poverty rates, the Indian government isn't using possessions, or housing, or access to health care and other services. Rather, the measuring is done in calories alone. In a rural area, an Indian who consumes less than 2,435 calories per day is judged as living in poverty; in urban areas, the benchmark is a lower 2,095 calories per day. While this daily-bread measure is, indeed, a strict and useful indicator, it does not measure poverty as the West would. By U.S. standards, India would have a much higher level of poverty--at least twice as many of the truly-poor, and likely more. Even homeless Westerners living in shelters enjoy a higher quality of life than India's poor--and many of our own poor would appear solidly middle class to Indian eyes.

Literacy numbers are similarly unconvincing, although India has made great strides in this field, too. While the southern state of Kerala reports nearly one hundred per cent literacy, and poorer states, such as Bihar and Orissa in the north, barely half that, the question arises as to what literacy means: Does it mean the ability to read a sign above a shop? Or a newspaper? What level of comprehension is implied? Does true literacy mean the ability to read and apply instructions in the workplace? Or is it reading a novel? India's standards appear low, thus inflating the number of "literate" citizens. Again, India has made remarkable progress, having embarked upon statehood as overwhelmingly illiterate--but when fly-by business executives are briefed that State X enjoys ninety per cent literacy, the number is only a very loose indicator of practical utility.

The purpose of citing these few numbers is not to portray India as doomed, but simply to put its progress and potential in perspective. India will continue to grow--unevenly--and it will reward patient and skilled foreign investors. But FDI allocated to India is the equivalent of betting on the long-shot at the track. Those

who want a greater certainly of return on their investment would be far better off putting their funds elsewhere for now. In fact, India's greatest advantage at present isn't anything it has to offer in and of itself, but simply the vast amount of global capital in search of opportunity.

## 2. A TALE OF TWO CITIES

*Oh, Calcutta!*

Of the sixteen Indian cities visited in the course of this project, two stood out as obvious extremes: Calcutta at the poorest and most troubled end of the scale, and Bangalore as the most prosperous and hopeful. These two cities demonstrate the effects of developmental choices, contrasting the failures of well-intentioned socialist and communist endeavors in Calcutta with the market-aware socialism and forthright capitalism of Bangalore. Had the contest been determined by rhetoric and beautiful promises, the successive governments of West Bengal and its greatest city, Calcutta, would have won easily. The state of Karnataka and its premier city, Bangalore, promised less, but did more. Today, Calcutta is--literally--rotting. Its day by day deterioration is a loss not only to India, but to mankind. Bangalore is the Indian equivalent of Kansas City in the days of the stockyard boom.

In describing and discussing these two cities, my first challenge has been to work through my personal feelings. I *liked* Calcutta--better than I did any other city on the sub-continent, including brash and booster-ridden Bangalore. Despite its deterioration, Calcutta remains a place of unexpected beauty and appealing culture. Built by the British on the foundation of a few riverside villages, its architectural heyday coincided with the classical revival in the West. As a result, Calcutta has a concentration of the finest architecture in India--far surpassing the gaudy atrocities of native construction (more on this below). While only the government buildings serving the highest level officials are kept painted and in repair (typical of socialist and communist regimes), walking the streets of Calcutta--and even the alleys--gives a history-addict the sort of thrill an archaeologist must feel upon discovering a lost city. Calcutta is also a city in love with books, and with music, theater, dance and, above all, intelligent conversation. The people (and not only the elite) are very proud of their cultured traditions--when I asked if a Bengali author I particularly like had been widely translated into Hindi, an old, threadbare intellectual (in an antique coffee house that had once served revolutionary cabals) answered in upper-crust English, "Hindi? We Bengalis say that Hindi is the language of servants and cooks..."

I mention these matters because I found Calcutta seductive and want to give credit where it is due--while alerting the reader to my distinct prejudice in favor of

the bookish and the beautiful. But, beyond the cups of coffee shared with poetry-quoting lawyers and zealous publishers, the reality of Calcutta is harsh. I have been assured that the poverty in the streets is markedly less today than in the past, and I can credit the claim to a degree--yet, walking, day after day, through the city's boulevards, streets, lanes and alleys makes it miserably clear why Mother Teresa chose Calcutta as the focus of her mission.

At the risk of redundancy, I must stress to American readers that Communists, especially in the developing world, often have been genuine idealists with the noblest intentions. Whenever it could afford to do so, Calcutta's Communist city government, in power for the past three decades, took direct action to help the poor, giving what it could afford. But direct action is a once-and-done method. You eat the food and it's gone. Only incisive structural reforms make a lasting difference. In India, the central figures in Communist state and local governments are often the most ethical politicians in the country. But ethics, admirable as they may be, are no substitute for sound policies. And, below the level of the true believers, the honesty and purposefulness of the cadres deteriorate swiftly into opportunism. The refusal of socialist or communist governments to offer varied incentives to workers leads, inevitably, to lassitude and corruption. Like all absolutes, enforced egalitarianism is as inhuman as it is impossible to achieve.

A standard complaint in India--especially forceful in Calcutta--is that state employees don't even bother to show up for their jobs for more than a few token hours per day (compounding the horrors of India's exquisitely-complex bureaucracy). During my stay, a government campaign was underway to force bureaucrats to behave responsibly by showing up at their places of work by ten o'clock in the morning, at the latest. There was a loud echo of the old Soviet joke: "The government pretends to pay us, so we pretend to work." Meanwhile, the emphasis on leftist principles has made unions outrageously powerful--even in the absence of jobs. Notoriously, the Communist government of West Bengal long resisted the introduction of computers, claiming they were a capitalist device intended to eliminate jobs and render the workers of the world superfluous. Today, the state and city governments are trying, desperately, to play catch-up, inviting investors to Calcutta and even constructing, in advance, a hi-tech park for a hoped-for influx of multi-national corporations. But the local economic structures are so broken, the deep system so corrupted, and the quality of life and work so dreadful, that it is extremely unlikely that major FDI will concentrate in Calcutta. And that sad little hi-tech park project wouldn't even impress the chamber of commerce in Meridian, Mississippi. Stir in the truculent, technologically-lagging, strike-when-we-feel-like-it workforce, and it's hard to be optimistic about the future business prospects of Calcutta and West Bengal.

Meanwhile, the city rots and the people suffer. Once the wealthy, vibrant capital of the "jewel in the crown" of Britain's empire, Calcutta is now the most septic, toxic city I have ever visited. While it is unlikely that U.S. military forces would ever have to operate in India (except, perhaps, on brief disaster-relief missions), India's cities, exemplified by Calcutta, pose nightmarish tactical environments. Complexity and density characterize an environment in which the slightest cut can lead to debilitating infection. Even in peacetime, the air pollution

and general filth simply wear you down. Calcutta is an exhausting city (if an endlessly intriguing one). You must always watch where you step--not to keep your shoes clean, which would be a hopeless task, but to avoid stepping on sprawled human beings. Physically and emotionally draining for a Westerner, Calcutta reeks of urine and exhaust, with intermittent whiffs of cooking (the general smells of India, only moreso). Personally, I have never visited a refugee camp where the conditions began to approach the misery of life on Calcutta's streets. Certainly, poverty is relative--many of the street people in Calcutta are economic refugees from nearby Bangladesh--but I know of no other city on any of the five continents I have visited where so many people daily live so close to the edge.

Ignored by their fellow citizens, the homeless poor create sidewalk homes for themselves. A curtain of rags marks off a tiny "room," and women artfully cook family meals on little sidewalk fires (you walk through a succession of open-air kitchens cluttering the sidewalk and feel, curiously, as if you're trespassing). There is, indeed, an inspiring side to Calcutta's poverty--the wondrous ability of human beings to adapt and survive (and sometimes even to smile amidst the misery) is on full display. The struggle to get through each day, washing from a bucket or at a local pump, while careful of personal modesty, and the will to keep families from disintegrating is impressive. But all this occurs despite government.

I long have been vain about my mental toughness and willingness to go just about anywhere--but in Calcutta there were narrow lanes and concentrations of the homeless that I had to order myself to march through, not out of fear, since the people were always either oblivious or friendly, but from disgust at the condition of my fellow man (I wouldn't make the late Mother Teresa's genuinely-heroic team). The stench seemed, at times, a tangible wall. And if you have an interest in dermatological extremes, Calcutta is the perfect place for your next vacation. I found myself using the French word *triste* to myself, since the English "sad" wasn't quite right or adequate, and "sorrowful" was too dramatic for the mundane nature of it all.

On paper, Calcutta is richer than it is in fact. Until its recent collapse, the Calcutta stock exchange did a startling amount of business, given the paucity of local ventures. But the money only came in from outside then left again--the stock market was used for the Indian version of money-laundering and fixed deals. A disproportionate number of banks operate in Calcutta--some legacies from the old, solvent days of British rule, but many deployed to launder money on the edge of legality. Meanwhile, old-line, well-to-do Calcuttans cling to a battery of English-knock-off clubs, from the Turf Club to the venerable Tollygunge Club, all of it gone a bit threadbare. New Alipore, where the consumer-class lives, is a neighborhood of instantly-shabby hi-rises with the poor squatting outside the walls, interspersed with single-house compounds in states of repair that would bring a lawsuit from even a slovenly American homeowner's association.

So long as you don't mind breathing the poisonous air, you may live comparatively well in Calcutta, especially if you have a touch of Marie Antoinette in your social attitudes and gladly accept the Christian warning that "the poor will always be with us." If, however, you have the least sense of solidarity with your

fellow man (a quality notably lacking in India, despite overflowing sewers of rhetoric), you will not spend a single untroubled day in this city. For anyone doing research, the greatest challenge posed by Calcutta is its tendency to teach you more about yourself than about anything else.

What will change? Not much, I suspect. Certainly, not enough to make a decisive difference for the (quite literal) man in the street. Red sloganeering is so deeply ingrained that the city is littered with a Lenin Street here and a bust of Ho Chi Minh there--the results of an ongoing effort to do away with as many British-era street names as possible (but Calcutta was a British city and there is simply no escaping it). The legendary Chowringhee Road, Calcutta's Fifth Avenue, was rechristened after Jawaharlal Nehru, although the locals ignore the change and still call it Chowringhee. Even the city's name has been "Indianized" to Kolkata, although the world has yet to take notice. Changing street signs may be gratifying, but it doesn't create a significant number of jobs. The oft-repeated expression "re-arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic" fits perfectly.

In the crowded, deteriorating university, drearily-serious young students still put up posters proclaiming solidarity with this and that, or scrawl leftist graffiti thirty years behind the times. The rickshaw (both the bicycle version and the old man-between-the-traces model) remains a popular form of transportation, and an estimated forty thousand of the vehicles ply the streets--although they are now banned from the main boulevards to ease traffic congestion. A reported one hundred-and-twenty-thousand drivers apply their leg muscles to those rickshaws in round-the-clock shifts. You see them sleeping on the sidewalk, curled up, awaiting their turn at begging for passengers. Despite the teeming sidewalks, the entire city seems to be waiting its turn, lost in time. Leftist theory amounts to a poor living carcass lying along the back of the sidewalk in hungry, exhausted slumber as the world walks by.

When you go out early in the morning, you get a real sense of the legions of the homeless. Well-fed and rested, with the fortress of a good hotel at your back, you step over bodies as if searching a battlefield. Passing by some of the older, unaffiliated sleepers, you can't be sure whether or not they're alive. Think you're tough, trooper? You won't go far before you recoil at an unexpected glimpse of what mankind can become. And then the city swells to life, teeming with the employed and the aimless, human waves moving you along--politely, though. And, unlike those in Indian cities frequented by tourists, as soon as you break free of the narrow hotel zone, the beggars grow rare and lose their aggressiveness. Everyone is just getting on with their lives as best they can, wearing tired faces at the start of the day. They pile onto sardine-can buses, each one an industry of pollution, or cram into one of the trams nicknamed "A Streetcar Named Disaster" by the local intellectuals, and their faces are a haunting mix of hope, resignation and emptiness.

Sidewalk booksellers offer dog-eared how-to-succeed manuals beside the Victorian novels of Mrs. Gaskell or wrinkled paperback editions of old Sidney Sheldon potboilers. By the university, block after block of bookstalls, mostly hawking the outdated textbooks the students can afford, give way to second-hand shops (one of which offered an intriguing selection of used bedpans). Across town

on a Saturday afternoon, in the once-splendid, run-down, neo-classical palace Lord Hastings built for his wife in the late eighteenth century and that has been transformed into the musty, book-poor "National Library" of West Bengal, wonderfully-earnest students sit at reading tables, pouring over computer texts shabby with wear or a previous decade's engineering books, as determined to break out of their environment as any American inner-city kid with a gift for sports. A prized collection of Shakespeare's works, in English editions and translated into India's major languages, goes ignored by the hard-headed young people studying the sciences--nor are they painting hammers-and-sickles on the walls. Leftist nonsense is for the Liberal Arts crowd, as is Shakespeare these days. The city's youth are self-selecting, and it isn't hard to pick tomorrow's winners and losers.

I would miss Shakespeare myself, but *Hamlet* and *King Lear* are no substitutes for a decent job. Of course, I'm blessed to live in a system where I don't have to choose between attainment and amusement--but the young people of Calcutta must struggle their way through a system designed to waste their best talents, and their battle leaves little time or energy for luxuries. Were I a foreign employer on a head-hunting mission, I would start my search among the hard-skills students of Calcutta. Liberated from the leveling mediocrity of their environment, the best of them would prove tremendous assets.

Meanwhile, the city builds to a frenzy as an international cricket match plays out in its main stadium--it's far easier to change street names than a people's taste in sports, and the Indian love of cricket has almost a religious fervor. Elsewhere, a waning Christianity ghosts through the city, while devout Hindu widows bathe in the Hooghly River. Ashrams attract Westerners hunting faith outside their hearts, convinced that God lives far away from home, and the few remaining synagogues seem as feeble as their aging, dwindling, sorrowing congregations. The Anglican cathedral shepherds the (Authorized Version) Christians of northern India, and an Armenian church, reminder of the city's traditional welcome for ambitious refugees, hides behind tattered shops. In the streets, laughing Hindu kids splash colored water on each other to celebrate the religious festival of Holi (Holi water, indeed). On Chowringhee, the YMCA, its old brass stair-rails well rubbed, offers "a home away from home, for gents, ladies, groups and families," with room, breakfast, lunch, tea and dinner for about five dollars a day (a very high sum for the majority of Indians). In a decrepit, top-of-the-stairs Bible society, aging Indian women sing the hymns of Wesley and Watts, while a nearby "Syber-Cafe" [sic] offers "internet, computer-training, English lessons and horoscope." When I step in, the computers are not working. Presumably, the horoscope is. No matter what your faith, Calcutta will throw you back upon the consolations of belief. It is a city in constant need of faith and deeds. And Communism, that Western splinter faith born on the Rhine, dozes in the municipal offices, dreaming of ways to attract capitalist wealth, while, in the streets, the great class struggle has long since faded into a struggle for survival.

I think of Calcutta as a dying old whore, once beautiful but never decent, somehow still able to exert a ghost of charm from the charity-ward bed where disease and indulgence have landed her. But that is as much a reflection of my own sensibility and education as of the city's reality. Looked at from another

angle, Calcutta is a peerless monument to the human ability to just get on with things.

Perhaps we could help out by turning the place into an educational theme park for the sort of naive Western undergraduates who want to save the world with earnest whining. I might even volunteer as a tour guide for the first field trip: "Look at that, Amy! Look over there, Jason! The road to Hell is paved with good intentions--and volumes of Marx and Lenin."

### *Boomtown Bangalore*

Bangalore has the highest jeans-on-janes ratio of any Indian city. Elsewhere, the lovely, restricting saree or the comfortable, demure salwar kameez dominate the fashion choices of Indian women. In Delhi or Bombay/Mumbai, you certainly will see a few privileged young women marching about in jeans, but in Bangalore's fashionable streets the saree is a style no-no among the gals with degrees, aspirations, or simply a dad who can and will indulge go-go Gita's globalized whims. On Brigade Road, center of a web from which the city's numerous pubs spider off to entice their prey with happy-hour offers of half-price Foster's lager on tap, I even saw one young Indian woman strolling past Pizza Hut in Bermuda shorts. Ray-bans shield the eyes of both sexes as the young women practice the off-duty poses of their favorite Bollywood starlets and the males of "Silicon Plateau" imitate the geeks of Silicon Valley in their pale-blue, button-down shirts, chinos and athletic shoes. Kentucky Fried Chicken is jumping over the counter and into the hands of Bangalore's consumers.

Now, even Wayfarers, Ralph Lauren polos (or knock-offs, anyway) and Timberland loafers may amount to no more than a costume masking profoundly different values and beliefs, but the Bangalore brat pack "gets" the West, or at least its American trappings, to a degree that the rest of India simply doesn't. Overall, India is a country K-Mart could upgrade considerably and to which we could profitably export any remaining stocks of disco-era pale-orange, electric-blue or lime-green leisure suits (male leads in Indian films still look like John Travolta before he became human, but they don't dance as well). The current rage among up-market Indians is for collecting Lladro figurines and Swakowski crystal, the nouveau riche equivalents of garden dwarfs and shaggy toilet-seat covers. But the Golden Youth of Bangalore are Californian wannabes, casting off the British legacy cherished by affluent parents. Their emphasis is on good jobs, not nationalist soul-searching.

From a broader perspective, it is a hallmark of Bangalore that the city government and population feel no unease with either the names or practices the British left behind. Bangalore is confident, more economical in its grand gestures than Calcutta, but much more energetic in the ways that count. Besides Brigade Road, you will still find Infantry Road, Cavalry Road, Queen's Road, Victoria

Road and many another colonial leftover in Bangalore. But the people of Bangalore have their eyes fixed on the future, while Calcutta is trapped in its past--and you can change the future, but only drown in history. In fact, the richest image I saw of culture clash in Bangalore appealed wonderfully to the aging activist hidden deep inside me: an adult Indian male peeing against the wall of the Citibank office on the main drag. No social commentary was intended by the gentleman involved in this very public display and the delighted symbolism imposed is my own.

I do not want to over-praise Bangalore or the Bangers (as an expat wit anointed them). The city is still grubby by American standards--although by far the cleanest I saw in India--and the air pollution coats your skin and scrapes your throat. There is poverty, too, though less in extent and degree. Proud young Bangers claim their city has fifteen hundred pubs, although the number is likely considerably less and most aren't exactly the bar at the Four Seasons. Billboards advertise new developments of "American style" homes and the city has the only attractive apartment blocks I saw in India--yet, most housing remains shabby and there isn't enough of it. Those lean gals in jeans perfecting their shopping rituals have soul sisters out on the highway breaking rocks with sledgehammers, and the multi-lane ring road around the city branches off to India's standard crumbling two-lane blacktops out of town. Beggars are not at your sleeve as steadily as they are elsewhere, but you can find a very impressive leper downtown when you need one (however, my favorite leper encounter took place on the outskirts of Madras, where a "Leper Treatment" facility stood adjacent to an open-front restaurant, giving a fresh resonance to the idea of ordering ladyfingers for dessert).

A Western businessman detailed to a tour in Bangalore could manage a very good quality of life--so long as no one in his family has asthma and he (or she) doesn't mind reading about a little outbreak of cholera over breakfast. Mamacita can troll through flashy indoor shopping malls, although she won't find a Nordstroms yet. T.G.I. Friday's is there for you, and the plumbing works...

You drive or walk through Bangalore and feel that positive things are happening. Despite many deficiencies, the city is, by far, the most encouraging in India. It is also nearly unique. Only Hyderabad (which I did not visit), with the tentacular presence of Microsoft, approaches the promise of Bangalore. And when asked about any rivalry with Hyderabad, residents of Bangalore will tell you, not without a touch of arrogance that, while Hyderabad has to offer incentives to attract international investment, multinationals come to Bangalore on their own. Currently, other Indian cities, from Calcutta to Madras/Chennai hope to rival Bangalore's success, but the odds against them are higher than the city governments appear to realize. While Madras or Mumbai certainly will have some successes, these may not prove statistically significant in relation to population size; even if they do, less well-positioned cities will be left behind. First, the world's appetite for Indian labor may continue to grow--but it is not infinite any more than India's pool of top-level, thoroughly-trained talent is inexhaustible. India may grow its IT sector impressively in coming years, but if it fails to diversify its development it will simply become an upscale version of countries that rely on single-crop exports such as coffee, cocoa or bananas. Second, among

the numerous reasons why Bangalore is succeeding is the fact that it was already diversified and developing before hi-tech took off. Bangalore offers a constellation of assets that, with the addition of IT, hit critical mass.

Before General Electric or Siemens arrived or Infosys got up on its hind legs, Bangalore already had a National Aerospace Laboratory, an aircraft industry (now building, proudly and extravagantly, an indigenously-developed fighter, the Light Combat Aircraft), medical schools and the best heart surgery hospital in India, a first-rate university and technical colleges--and a government open to change and progress, and that reinforces success. Not all of the firms locating branches in Bangalore are looking for discount software writers, either. Toyota has a significant presence and Tata, the family corporation that nearly devoured India, felt the need to expand its presence significantly to keep pace with the new invaders. Bangalore is enjoying the synergies of success--and now needs to work on its infrastructure problems if it hopes to consolidate its achievements and become a world-class city.

The high-tech business parks were revealing--and not all of the news was as good as the city's most vocal boosters would have it. Before taking a brief tour of the two most important parks, it's vital to note that India's hi-tech boomlet occurred because the national government was looking the other way. Composed largely of despicable and backward boss-man politicians, the parliament and successive governments focused on the cream that could be skimmed from traditional sources--their ignorance of the hi-tech revolution sweeping the developed world allowed enlightened governments, such as those of Bangalore and Hyderabad, to attract and cooperate with technologically-oriented multinationals while members of parliament were still trying to squeeze bigger bribes out of dying steel mills. Should New Delhi be overtaken by greed at the spectacle of hi-tech wealth generation, or should local governments grow over-confident and arrogant, the wave of development could ebb as easily as it flowed. I've noted above that techno-skills are not geographically restricted like mineral wealth, and that they are subject to long-term competition, despite the educated Indian's celebrated talent for technology. But there are other dangerous factors at work, as well, which are briefly discussed below.

The sprawling Whitefields development is most impressive when viewed from the middle distance. Vacant lots await construction between gleaming examples of corporate international architecture, all leading the eye toward a massive charity hospital built in the revived Indo-Saracenic style (picture a mosque built in Las Vegas by Donald Trump). Behind the hospital's domes, the blocky, glassy towers of a Singapore-funded technology center house dozens of corporate offices, among them Sony, Tata, Siemens, G.E. and Lucent (which may have to move to India in its entirety, if its stock continues to fall). As you drive down the wide, empty boulevards, you pass monuments to the Emperor of General Electric, "John F. Welch This" and "John F. Welch That," a shameless display of vanity that curdled the blood of this particular stockholder. The overall effect is of globalization succeeding at full throttle.

But when you get close enough to *really* see, it quickly becomes clear that this entire facility isn't of sufficient quality to pass muster in a middling New Jersey

suburb. Leaving aside the shabby shop-rows and near-poverty beyond the park's perimeter, the fact is that none of these impressive-at-a-distance structures are built to last. Even allowing for the notoriously-poor quality of Indian construction (the revelations in the wake of the Gujarat earthquake were not exceptional), it doesn't take a building inspector to note the provisional nature of the multinational commitments made to date. In terms of sunk costs, G.E. could walk away from Bangalore overnight and the write-off for the facilities wouldn't amount to a blip in quarterly earnings. The Singapore-funded towers, built over the last several years and barely completed, already hint at the crumbling to come.

One of the best skills you can develop in judging foreign environments is simply the habit of forcing your eye away from where it naturally wants to go, and Whitefields proves the point. Bangalore is not Silicon Valley. And the most obvious symptom of difference isn't that poor construction (there are some ramshackle buildings within Porsche range of San Jose, too). The real difference is in the parking lots. If you want to gauge not only the current income level, but also the *expected* income level of those "brilliant" young Indian employees, tear your eyes away from the architecture and consider the postage-stamp parking lots. This is still public transportation and motor scooter country--and the multinationals expect it to remain that way. They do not expect the bulk of their employees to be able to afford their own automobiles in the future. Those Indian techies do great work--but the low wages are the real magnet for the multinationals. When, inevitably, demands for higher wages swell beyond an acceptable threshold, Bangalore (and India) will face the first real test of its appeal as a hi-tech homestead. And, by the way, the cars that do fill those smallish lots aren't Porsches.

Inside the buildings, most have cut-corner lobbies and discount fixtures. The large, gray-toned offices filled with Dilbertian cubicles are truly international (and more appealing, by far, than the average Indian workplace), but they could be collapsed quicker than a circus tent. The best design and construction at Whitefields is 90% work, and the largest facilities aren't furnished to impress visitors. For now, employees are very glad to have jobs which catapult them ahead of the vast majority of their peers--and, in an important development for India, many now prefer to stay in Bangalore rather than emigrate or to work abroad on limited visas (as noted above, most people will choose good prospects at home over great prospects elsewhere). But these Indian satellites are going to have to continue to earn their keep at competitive rates indefinitely. Certainly, it will be interesting to see whether the multinationals retain workers and develop their careers or choose, instead, to keep filling the workplace from the bottom with hungry young hires.

Bangalore's second important tech park lies south of town, on the Mysore Road, where the garbage quotient is higher. The endless public dump that lines India's roadsides leads past auto dealerships and business hotels for the shoestring-allowance set. Electronics City begins just off the highway, and here the corporate officers are crowded together--Infosys, a prime sponsor and India-based, Hewlett-Packard, Motorola, a large Siemens campus, Tata again...but the environmental contrast is more pronounced, with the gleaming park surrounded by glum shacks,

filth and undeniable poverty (to be fair, many of Bangalore's poorest residents are internal immigrants attracted by the city's success).

A key challenge may turn out to be the Indian lack of perspective. If you do not have visual benchmarks from the United States or even northwestern Europe, Bangalore's technology parks must seem very impressive, indeed, and it would be easy for the novice to assume that there's no going back for the companies that have invested here. But, given the ferocity of markets and the pace of change, retaining its wealth base and continuing to grow may be every bit as difficult for Bangalore as was the ignition period. All the investment in Bangalore to date is trivial in global terms. Certainly, physical-plant investments are no longer a direct corollary of expected returns, and the wealth generated by talented Indians has less to do with buildings than with brains, but a change of government or simply of mood that resulted in local efforts to squeeze the global cash cow could be devastating for the city. Even the Americas are littered with economic ghost towns that were yesterday's boomtowns, and a few wrong decisions could send Bangalore down the path of Scranton, Pennsylvania, rather than along that of Austin, Texas.

Nonetheless, the odds are good that Bangalore will continue to prosper. It offers a far better total package than any other Indian city and lacks only an upgraded airport and a bit more economic expansion to attract direct international flights, thus shutting Bombay/Mumbai, the usual port of entry for the Bangalore-bound, out of the picture entirely. And that raises an alternative model for Bangalore's development: Globally, there is a quiet regression toward new forms of the city-state, whose lineage runs from Athens to the Venetian Republic to Singapore. In many ways, Bangalore is already a de facto, though not de jure, city-state, practically, economically and culturally separated even from towns and villages an hour's drive away. A rising tide in Bangalore (or Hyderabad) will not lift all the nation's boats, and it will be fascinating to watch the dynamics between ever-wealthier Bangalore and cash-starved New Delhi. Resentment toward the hegemony of northern Indians has been simmering since independence (and, in some local cases, for much longer), manifested not only in the linguistic rivalries discussed above but even in the perception of national advantage (northern Indians tend to be hard and uncompromising regarding Kashmir, favoring a military solution, while southern Indians repeatedly told me they would just as soon let far-away Kashmir go and get on with the business of doing business). As a minimum, that elementary human emotion, jealousy, will increase nationally as some cities and regions prosper and others remain painfully poor--and increasingly aware of the disparity.

I didn't like Bangalore. But I'm yesterday's man.

### **3. IS CULTURE FATE?**

## *Caste-aways*

Ask an emigre Indian about the Hindu caste system and the response will be about as forthright as if you had asked a Catholic priest to explain the Inquisition. Better-educated Indians and those with foreign exposure understand that Westerners see the caste system, to the degree they are aware of it, as bigoted and unfair, so the general answer to your question will be along the lines of, "Oh, caste isn't so important now, some of my best friends are..."

But press on with your questioning and ask that Indian if he or she expects to marry outside of their caste, or if they would want their children to do so. At that point, the tap-dancing really begins. They will admit that they believe marriage should still be within caste--not because they're prejudiced, of course, but for the sake of their "old-fashioned" parents, or because the children from an inter-caste union wouldn't have a proper caste of their own, or just because "It's easier that way." Despite genuine openings in the public sphere and undeniable (if uneven) progress, in the private realm caste maintains a ferocious hold that embitters, defeats and destroys.

Certainly, there have been liberalizations, many of them legislated, while others have been driven by changes in the structures of modernizing daily life. For example, universities reserve abundant spots for lower castes, "scheduled castes" and tribals, frequently carrying affirmative action to counter-productive extremes the silliest American campus activists haven't attempted to achieve. In various official contexts, the tables often are turned against the traditionally-dominant castes. Elsewhere, high-caste inhibitions falter for practical reasons: a Brahmin whose heritage should require him to avoid eating with utensils or from crockery previously used by any member of a lower caste can't very well travel, stay in hotels and have dinner in restaurants without liberalizing his habits a bit.

But it is far easier to legislate overt behaviors than to alter personal prejudices (indeed, in the United States a current dilemma is that integration has gone as far as the law can push it, but an ineradicable residue of bigotry always remains in the human heart--especially, when that heart is embedded in a body left behind by progress and prosperity). Members of different castes may now study and work together, or eat in the same restaurant and even (though not always) at the same table, but the preponderance of wealth and power still belongs to the highest castes (as well as to members of religious minorities with strong commercial traditions, such as the Jains and Parsees, while Muslims and Christians tend to be poorer).

India has made real and meaningful progress in that, today, a talented member of a lower caste or other previously-excluded group may have a chance to succeed. But for his or her one chance, the offspring of the elite still get ten or a hundred chances. The allocation of wealth within the society still determines, statistically, the quality of education and the indoctrination into social codes that allow entrance into dominant social and economic circles. Progress continues, but the traditionally downtrodden still must struggle against the odds. Yes, they can now

gain an education--if they can afford to stick to the task. But, except in the case of truly exceptional talent fortuitously positioned, the *dalit* or untouchable will not get the same quality education as the elite child whose family can afford private schools (in the English "public school" tradition). In another parallel with African-Americans, lower-caste Indians have, since independence, developed their own financial "aristocracy," which consumes most of the benefits of affirmative action programs while blithely leaving the still-poor behind.

All this may sound like the wealth and privilege stratification that occurs in virtually every society, but, in India prejudice is multi-layered to the point of suffocation and opportunity is much more restricted than even in old Soviet and Warsaw Pact societies, let alone in North American meritocracies. And the breadth of the problem and the number of obstacles far exceed those in more successful societies. Caste is still apartheid with a pretense of divine sanction.

The caste system will continue to erode, but the process will be slow and often frustrating. Even now, there are faith-inspired backlashes against caste liberalizations, with militant high-caste associations insisting that true religion is under siege; yet, fundamentally, the caste system could not have begun as a religious inspiration or have appeared as a result of divine revelation or intervention. It is clearly a secular concept robed in religion for efficacy. The Hindu caste system doubtless was devised, at an untraceable point in the distant past, as a system of resource allocation to assure the continued survival and prosperity of those already in power--priestly and warrior castes, with a bit of room made down the ladder for necessary merchants and artisans. It is essentially a rationing system that rates, on a sliding scale, the value of the human being to the power group's survival. In times of famine, war or pestilence, the big boys were going to do okay--if the little guy starved or died some other miserable death, hey, he must've done something wrong in a previous life, or he wouldn't have been re-born as a low-rider--his suffering was part of the celestial plan and Billy Brahmin had no responsibility toward him...

Imposing a religious justification on this rationing system was a mark of human genius, not of divine *diktat*. Nor is such misuse of religion to justify a perceived social necessity or to gain group advantage a Hindu monopoly--the Hindu power-brokers just happened to hit the jackpot, but counterparts (not of caste, but of religious sanction) may be found in other major religions, from the brutality of Leviticus through the injunctions of the Koran on down to the God-made-me-do-it whopper about the divine right of kings. Religion has been employed since before the beginning of testable history to justify the power of the powerful. The Hindu model is simply more pervasive, far more ingenious, bolder and more enduring, and immeasurably crueler than the structures of any other extant major religion.

India is a land of many divisions--rich and poor, English-speaking and non-English-speaking, urban and rural--which often overlap. A high-caste Indian, in his or her cocoon of traditional advantages, is more likely to be well-off and English-speaking (the relationship between those two advantages has long been a direct one) and, if urban, more apt to belong to the city's or town's elite. Although Britain's colonial legacy to India will be discussed in some detail below, at this point it's necessary to note that one of the negatives the British example left behind

was the concept of rigid social class that prevailed at the height of the Raj. When the British insistence on firm class (and skin color) barriers met the Indian caste system, the indigenous upper castes embraced it with enthusiasm--the condescension in the theatrical British accent of an upper-caste Indian matron grates horribly on democratic ears.

Simply put, India has always been a shortage society. The caste system arose to ensure that the haves remained haves, and damn the have-nots. Today, India is changing, but not as swiftly as a glance at its legislation suggests. The haves are fighting a rear-guard action and, despite their protestations of innocence, will continue to do so--sometimes violently.

It may seem paradoxical, then, to observe that the swiftest changes are coming among the educated, urban and, especially, emigre Indians, who are often from the higher castes. But they are simply being propelled beyond their prejudices by the torrent of change. The endlessly-entertaining matrimonial advertisements in the Indian Sunday papers increasingly feature the phrase "caste no bar," with "sub-caste no bar" even more common. Money-making skills and a visa to the United States are powerful incentives to bend, if not fully break, caste laws.

And not all of the Indians who tell you that caste "really isn't much of a problem anymore" are being evasive or dishonest. Some genuinely believe it--and they are invariably well-educated and urban, for the cities are where change first occurs in any culture. Yet, one standard may apply in a luxury apartment on Mumbai's Malabar Hill, while a very different one still prevails in the dreadful sheds and shanties clustered just beyond the fence of the city's Shivaji International Airport. In much of the countryside, caste is still as strong a barrier as it was a hundred years ago.

If you pose that same question about caste to an Indian struggling to make ends meet in rural Bihar, he will give you a very different answer than will the guy in the office in Reston, Virginia.

Even when Indians individually seek to change the system, the law often goes out the window--or is turned against them. An admirable man I met in Madurai went to the director of his daughter's school on registration day and, although he was from a privileged caste (though not wealthy himself), he asked that his daughter not be assigned a caste on her paperwork. The director's response was that, in the interests of fairness in the allocation of places in the school, the law demanded that every student be identified by caste. Recognizing the self-serving nature of the high-caste director's answer, the father asked, again, that his daughter not be listed by her caste. The director answered that he would certainly comply, if the father insisted, but, in that case, the daughter could not attend his school, since spaces were allocated by caste--and the well-intentioned law was on the bigot's side.

For foreigners (especially those packing dollars), caste rarely interferes with social interactions, and the upper-caste Indian will grit his teeth and wait until you leave to erase the pollution of your presence, while others of the sort visitors are likely to meet genuinely are not bothered by the touch of those outside the system. But, once in a while, you get a hint of things.

At a town outside of Madras, which was overrun by German tourists who had signed up for A Thousand and One Nights and got, instead, Thirty Days in the Hole, I invited a well-educated young Indian with whom I'd been chatting to lunch. After thinking about it for a moment, he accepted, both to continue the discussion underway and because I was paying. He made it abundantly clear that he was a strict vegetarian, so to accommodate his beliefs, I also ordered a vegetarian meal--no hardship, since vegetarian food is varied and splendid in most of India. Then, as we sat across the table from each other, he asked for tap water, declining any mineral water from the howitzer-shell-sized bottle between us--from which the waiter had already poured my glass full. As we sat waiting for our meals, my companion said, suddenly, "You know, my family are very pure Brahmins. My father would not even sit at the same table with you." He gave a small, unconvincing laugh, but was clearly proud of his own open-mindedness.

A few minutes later, with the food still cooking back in the kitchen, he said, "Really, my father, to this day, would not sit at the table with anyone below our caste. Of course, it's terribly stodgy of him. I am not like that." Then, when the food arrived, as spicy-hot as the day was humid, the young man went through a third variation of the same litany. And he ate tentatively, glancing at me now and then, as though I might reach over and stick an unclean finger from my left hand into his curry.

At that point, I began to wish I could have ordered a big, bleeding, still-mooring slab of beef for my guest's edification. I caught a glimpse of how it must have been (and, perhaps, sometimes still is) for African-Americans back in the 'sixties when they were invited to dinner by well-meaning, oblivious liberals determined to show that they weren't prejudiced.

### *A Passion for Education*

The most impressive and encouraging attribute of India's people is their insatiable appetite for education. The Indian attitude toward education is at once sturdy and fervent. Students apply themselves with a self-denial approaching a Victorian ideal, while parents sacrifice endlessly to enable their children to receive the best possible educations--with the emphasis on acquiring marketable skills of the sort that may build not only successful careers but a state's future, as well. Similar in aspiration and discipline to the premier East Asian cultures in this zeal for learning and the credentials it brings, this activist faith in education is the single most positive factor at work in India's struggle to develop itself.

Certainly, the passion for education is not universal. Just as many poor-white and self-segregating minorities in the United States remain hostile to "too much" education, so, too, do many rural Indians subscribe to traditional, familial logic that favors working hands today over working minds tomorrow. The same pattern holds for many of the urban poor, with the variation that these are more apt to

recognize, even to mythologize, the value of an education but simply live too close to the margin to shepherd their offspring through more than a few, if any, years of schooling. But the "average" Indian above these stunted levels both values learning in the abstract and views university degrees as talismanic in their marvelous power to better individual lives.

Likewise, one of the greatest achievements of independent India--second in order behind the elimination of routine hunger and common starvation--has been the near-miraculous expansion of educational opportunities. The Indian system of education is deeply flawed, unfair, wildly uneven, methodologically backward, under-resourced, brutally capricious and capriciously brutal...yet, the past half-century's transition from an overwhelmingly illiterate state to one in which the majority of citizens are functionally literate should be regarded as one of the most astonishing and admirable achievements of the twentieth century--especially, since education got off to a disappointingly slow start in the newly-independent state.

India has a long tradition of respect for learning (of which more below). Although some religious, ethnic or caste groups inherited a stronger pro-education legacy than others, one of India's rare bits of luck was that the men at the center of the independence movement and then of the new state were intellectuals who revered knowledge and learning. For all their many other faults and deficiencies, these leaders and (literal) masterminds were beautifully educated, and they inoculated independent India with the belief that learning was the key to personal and national development. Prime Minister Nehru, especially, believed that education was vital to lift the population--although he achieved far less than he hoped for during his years as the head of the state, due to his own ineffectual management and, above all, to the newly-freed India's immense poverty and immediate needs. But Nehru's outlook took hold, and subsequent governments were able to continue educational expansion at all levels.

Today, the most inspiring sights in India aren't the over-rated monuments to the miseries of the past but the pairs and little groups of uniformed boys and girls walking along the country roads in the morning, headed for bare-bones village schools--or a glimpse of an oversize class seated on the shaded earth of a school courtyard, the children indelibly earnest as their teacher drills them on their lessons. Few of those country kids are going to fulfill great destinies--but some will. And the potential difference between their prospects and those of their grandparents is even greater than that between today's American children and their immigrant ancestors. Certainly, some of India's states have done far more for education than have others in India (with Communist-led governments often the most determined to provide educational opportunities)--but even the worst-off state is, educationally, better off than it was on the fifteenth of August, 1947.

India's universities, though admirable in their intent, are less inspiring. The superb IT workers and other members of the elite with whom Americans are likeliest to come into contact have squeezed through the eyes of a long series of needles. These success stories are graduates of India's handful of small, fiercely-selective Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) or Indian Institutes of Science (IISs), or of the best faculties of India's finest universities. In many cases, these top performers have also studied abroad, and a high proportion were groomed for

the future in private preparatory schools that, despite the introduction of scholarship students, still cater to the existing elite.

The dramatic expansion of the number of universities and faculties since independence has, inevitably, resulted in a severe dilution of quality (to be fair, the even broader and deeper expansion in American higher education since the days of the G.I. bill has also meant a lowering in the average quality of professors and students, although the result in the United States has been to prepare those who once would not have been "college material" for better jobs than they otherwise might attain, while the effect in India has been to create a vast pool of those whose formal credentials exceed their practical possibilities). While the best graduates of India's finest programs can hold their own with any minds in the world, the average Indian graduate's degree has not equipped him or her for acute contributions to the national economy--or for the rigors of globalization. India's educational programs are massive--but when you praise them to an alert, successful Indian, he or she will likely put on a sardonic grimace and tell you, "We succeed despite our educational system, not because of it."

Learning in India still means rote learning, certainly at the primary and secondary levels but also, to a startling extent, in the universities. The antecedent isn't Plato's academy, with its emphasis on thought and debate, but the nineteenth-century schoolroom under the no-nonsense rule of Mr. Thrasher and Miss Whackum. The British put an educational system in place during their stay and, although smallish and designed to furnish the Raj with clerical help, it formed the basis for today's Indian system of learning. Unfortunately, it was a memorization system, stern and interested exclusively in putting facts into young minds, not in developing their creative or reasoning powers, an approach all too congenial to India's minutely-stratified society (these comments are not intended to dismiss the importance of memorization, the importance of which is woefully underestimated in today's American educational system, but to make the point that the Indian system is extreme in its reliance solely upon rote learning, except in the finest schools and institutes). Indian IT workers are impressively agile and nimble of intellect (more on this, too, below)--but they do not represent the average product of the Indian educational system.

On the positive side, Indians do an amazingly good job under austere conditions--but sometimes those conditions are so impoverished that faculties remain mired in yesterday's lessons (and textbooks), or cannot provide development opportunities for faculty members. Many Indian universities are impressive in their size, and the older among them often have handsome, if decaying, architecture on their shabby, Raj-era campuses. But the overall impression is of poverty. Indian professors live in quarters that would drive an American undergraduate into violent revolt, and student living conditions are often 19th century in their harshness. Student poverty has long been a romanticized (and largely bygone) rite of passage in the West--but, today, universities require far more resources to insure an adequate contemporary education and students need current texts and access to global information to become competitive. While human effort will always be at the core of education, a hard-skills education today requires an unprecedented level of available wealth to approach its full potential.

Also, Indian students at all levels have been victims of educational experiments, usually politically tendentious, that appear to have done far more harm than good, sometimes reversing previous gains (these experiments have been even more destructive than the self-esteem movement in American schools, in which any demand for achievement is viewed as psychologically and socially destructive--a reflection of the dumbing-down of the teaching profession as vastly-expanded opportunities became available to intelligent women whose careers, in previous generations, would have been confined to America's classrooms). And India's aggressive affirmative action programs in the field of education, while far more positive than negative in their collective effect, result in backlash and bitterness (on a far, far greater scale than in the United States) when students of privileged families or from long-dominant social groups are denied coveted places because, legally, the slots must go to a less-qualified student from an underprivileged background. As Americans have seen, well-intentioned attempts at social justice, broadly and inflexibly applied, result in individual injustice and alienation; surely, the struggle for social justice is as old as humankind and likely will endure until humanity's end, but draconian "reforms" invariably stultify and corrupt. The counter-productive effects of strict quotas recently became obvious when Delhi University, required by law to have 1400 faculty members from scheduled (low) caste and tribal backgrounds, but with only 100 currently employed, announced that all hiring of higher-caste faculty would cease until the quota had been filled--both reducing available faculty in a classroom environment already numerically overwhelmed and likely to drag on for years, since faculty prospects from less privileged backgrounds simply are not available in the required numbers across India.

The result of such bureaucratically-suffocating programs of heroic intent has been to lower the quality of education. Certainly, there are no easy answers (as we Americans have learned, at the expense of our nation's children), and an educational system that recognizes no claims for social redress is likewise unacceptable. But the reservoir of educated talent (domestic and of foreign origin) available to the United States makes work-arounds feasible, while India, losing its best talent to emigration, must struggle at every step. As always in India, the outside observer's challenge is to make a balanced judgement of an unbalanced country.

The situation is worsened even more by corruption and lawlessness. At the university level, student violence is common, and politicized student unions that are really nothing but gangs haunt the poorer, overburdened campuses. Too many professors and instructors try to make ends meet by selling grades or other favors, while students "protect" themselves through blackmail. I do not want to make too much of this, since the average Indian student is struggling admirably against adversity in his or her efforts to gain an education and the ticket to a better life. Likewise, many teachers and professors are selfless, dedicated and so deeply in love with learning in general and with their specific subjects that they put our own Volvo-academics to shame (in general, I am awed and humbled by the reverence so many Indians feel toward learning and that one indispensable tool of human progress, the book). Underpaid and under-equipped, those charged with teaching

face lives of paucity, while their eager young students are likely the first members of their families to set foot on a campus. Horror stories abound, and the overall educational system is backward and woefully inadequate. Yet, the progress India has made reinforces my belief in man-made miracles.

### *The New Babu Class*

But why do those Indians write such damned good software, anyway? Even allowing for that Indian employee's determination to succeed and the fact that he or she likely trained at an IIT whose admissions criteria are stricter than Stanford's, Indians do seem to have a heightened ability to navigate the high-tech seas (of course, many Indian "IT" employees only perform tele-work back-office functions for foreign corporations and depend upon their English skills, not on technowizard abilities). Perhaps Indians possess no innate advantage and their successes are due primarily to the hunger to succeed, coincident opportunity, and, as I've repeatedly commented, the fact that we're getting the best of a billion people. But let us suppose, for now, that at least some Indians do have a greater-than-average "feel" for the fluid intricacies of information technology. I believe there may be two inter-related explanations, one historical and the other cultural.

Historically, the *Hindu* intelligentsia has a tradition of at least a thousand years of serving as clerks and scribes to whichever ruler could pay. Under various regional dynasties and empires, culminating in the Marathas, a Hindu administrative class matured. These literate helpmates of the mighty rarely amassed personal power or mandarin-style social status, but their abilities enabled the development of complex taxation systems and functional administrations--always brought down in the end by raw physical violence. Concurrently with the waning of the Middle Ages in Europe, Muslim invaders from Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central Asia established feudal kingdoms and minor empires in much of northern India. These, too, often employed Hindu clerks, although not with any impressive administrative integration until the arrival of the Mughals (simultaneously with the Protestant Reformation in northern Europe). The ethnically-Turkic Mughals were influenced culturally by more sophisticated Persia (the Taj Mahal is Persian, not Indian, in inspiration) and, as soon as they settled down to imperial consolidation, they began to develop an administrative infrastructure to better control their gains. Although the Mughals long resisted the admission of Hindus to their warrior aristocracy (finally the Rajputs, then some Marathas, made it in), they quickly took to employing the skilled clerks and administrators their Indian possessions had to offer---even luring Hindu accountants and scribes from southern territories not under Mughal control or hegemony.

Then the British came, with their masterful ability to barricade an empire with paper walls. Diligent, curious and just at the beginning of their three-hundred-year

golden age, the British arrived in India at a time when their appetites were many and their scruples were still few. They encountered a Mughal empire--a patch-work civilization--in decline and lesser Indian states as militarily opportunistic as they were culturally complacent. Immediately in need of translators, and soon in want of local clerical help, the British went from on-the-job training to the establishment of Company schools and, eventually, universities. As their empire expanded, the British never lacked eager candidates for "writer's" jobs with the East India Company and, subsequently, under the Raj. A term for these (usually Hindu) clerks and minor officials was "babu" (although, in Calcutta, the word has a different meaning and a babu was a rich native trader, often of notorious extravagance). Initially, and for many decades thereafter, babu was a term of respect for position and educational accomplishment, and families even took the word as a last name. Today, babu has become an epithet of derision, especially among India's bright young things, used to describe a smug, unhelpful, often-corrupt bureaucrat. The term is now as insulting to an Indian as the word "intellectual" is to an American.

Yet, today's Indian software writers and other IT professionals are clearly the inheritors of the babu legacy, itself built upon the cultural inheritance of centuries of earlier Indian clerks and scribes. The babu "class" hired themselves out to the foreign employers and the multinationals corporations of the day (the British East India Company was a pioneer multinational, complete with its own venture capitalists, corporate ethos, security forces, globe-spanning transportation network, and an international web of mutually-supporting ventures). Call that young Hyderabad-born techie working for Sun Microsystems in California a "babu" and he or she will be insulted, indeed. Yet, the lineage is undeniable when viewed clearly. A thousand years of history, custom and ambitions have propelled India's IT workers forward, working profitably with their minds and literacies for the paymaster of the moment, just as their ancestors did.

So much for the historical aspect. The cultural explanation is more complex and, frankly, speculative on my part.

I believe there is strong evidence in the Hindu religion and in India's cultural traditions for some innate predisposition on the part of Indians to deal with the ceaseless metamorphoses and "poly-rhythms" of the IT world.

Certainly, talented individuals from any culture may succeed in the various realms of IT. But, especially as software complicates and systemic inter-complexity deepens, I suspect that the Hindu inheritance and the broader Indian cultural mindset offer some advantage over mentalities shaped by monotheist religions and the cultures they produced. Indians are adept at codes because their spiritual environment is more richly coded than others. Let me try to explain.

In Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the arguments have always been about which path to salvation is the One Way. These are religions of One True God and of a strictly-dualistic universe. We, the "people of the Book" see, or insist that we see, a world in black and white, in which we choose between heaven or hell, God or the devil, darkness or light, right or wrong, and yes or no. But in Hinduism, most, if not all, things are mutable. Are there three million gods, or only three thousand? At the top of the god-pile, there are only three main figures--Shiva,

Vishnu and Brahma in their commonest names--but each has multiple forms and alternate faces, and they possess wives with their own multiple incarnations, intermingling with a vast tangle of subordinate gods, demi-gods and demons. Rather than pursuing the manageable ideal of a finite cosmos as the great monotheist religions have done since their inceptions ("What is the answer?"), Hinduism allows for a generous, bewildering range of possibilities ("This answer today, that one tomorrow..."). Some paths are certainly truer than others, but there is no One True Path that eliminates the possibility of alternatives; rather, there are many possible paths to the ultimate outcome (sound like sophisticated software yet?).

Hinduism, while it has socially-infernal taboos, has few governing laws for daily behavior. Even worship is comparatively fluid, if not anarchic, to the monotheist mentality (I suspect that a prime reason for the appeal of the myth of the Wisdom of the East is that just about anyone uncomfortable in their original religious home can find--or create--a comfortable, undemanding option somewhere in Hinduism). Now all this is, of course, my primitive simplification of the ineffably complex, but I believe, however unfashionably, in cultural determinism. If we could find a truly disinterested observer (certainly not Krishna exterminating Arjuna's conscience in the *Mahabharata*, a holy book that excuses savagery like no other), who would he or she select as the likeliest to succeed in the subterranean depths of information technology? Someone raised in the monotheist "there's only one right answer" tradition, or in a tradition of relativism and endless multiplicity?

Consider even the Hindu proposition that the material world is not "real," but merely a veil. While Christianity has always harbored a hint of this on its more mystical voyages, the concept pervades Hinduism to its depths. Now, there are certainly downsides to the idea that the material world is merely a veil of illusion--it's a terrific excuse for not picking up the garbage, with the result that India is the filthiest country I have ever encountered, and it hardly forces you to take the plight of your fellow man seriously--but the mind that insists too avidly on concrete reality is handicapped in the IT world, while a mind that can accept layered, even contradictory realities, or invisible (digital?) parallels to the visual world, must enjoy some advantage.

Which brings me to cultural manifestations. Comparatively speaking, India's is a non-visual culture. Certainly Indians have eyes and see a truck coming their way as other human beings do, but, perhaps because of the notion that the material world is an illusion, or maybe just because of inherited traditions of appalling taste, or simply because of different habits and priorities with no deeper resonance, India, for all the carefully-angled photographs in the tourist brochures, is overwhelmingly a drab, jumbled, slovenly and visually-unappealing country. With the sole exception of that sublime, Persian-inspired tomb, the Taj Mahal, India's famed architectural monuments may be visually impressive, but that is not the same thing as aesthetically successful (frankly, the best architecture in India is the neo-classical stuff left behind by the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century British residents). In Indian taste, architectural or otherwise, there is little regard for balance, clarity or order, and enlightened utility takes a backseat to hideous

ostentation. A striking effect is always preferred to simple beauty. More is more, and shapes, colors and disparate themes are just piled on.

Hinduism's fabled temples are lightless and grim--while the effective use of light is the single most important aesthetic and humanizing quality in architecture (in my experience of the architecture of India's indigenous religions, only a few Jain temples exploit light's sublime qualities). The history of Western architecture is a history of the triumph of light over darkness, of the ever larger window, of an opening to the world. In Hindu India, accretive, piled-on temple complexes center on gloomy inner sanctums far darker than Europe's Romanesque monuments, with nothing as visually "modern" as Gothic cathedrals--dark to our eyes today, but dazzling miracles of light in the age of their construction, with their stunning rose windows and light-welcoming clerestories. Whether palaces or private homes, Indian architecture shuns light like a vampire; there is always a closing off, a shutting out, a psychological and visible delineation, perhaps even a refusal of the veracity of visual reality in the lightlessness of India's monuments. Placement reflects mentality, and Hindu gods in their temples are always positioned in dark grottoes or in shadowed halls--never in revelatory baths of light. In those temple shadows and black recesses, the softening of visual boundaries implies a fluidity between the visual world and an annihilating greater reality. Nor does the excuse of the climate and the quest for shade explain this preference for murkiness--open constructions are cooler than confined spaces.

Even in the dreadful jumbles of cement cubes that well-off contemporary Indians favor for their homes, there is never a sense of visual order or of the delight in balancing beauty with function. Nor is maintenance a priority, either for rich or poor. Casual ugliness and the embrace of cheap effects sum up Indian visual taste.

Well, it would seem natural enough that, for a culture that believes the physical world is an illusion, *Better Homes and Gardens* or *Architectural Digest* won't top the subscription list. But the Indian compensates for this lack of concern with the outer by a heightened appreciation of the inner (I am speaking here of environments, not of souls, and of the priorities accorded the senses, not of salvation). The wall surrounding a rich Indian's mansion may wear a necklace of garbage intolerable to us, or be constructed by a stagnant pool or near a jumble of hovels, but the compound will be clean within and the interior of the house cleaner still. Blithely passing his days in a public world of inestimable filth, the Indian is studiously clean about his or her person and wary of various sorts of personal pollution. Perhaps because India's environment, in every sense, has always been so threatening, there has been a long turning inward, a retreat from social and civic responsibilities, a flight into one's family and its shared walls, and, in the arts, a flight from the visual into alternate complexities and an appeal to the more private, shorter-range senses. In a teeming, oppressive, dangerous world (embodied by the visual), the Indian re-aligns the priority of sensual stimuli. He doesn't see the leper begging at his knee or the filth at his ankles. He subordinates the visual world to his personal advantage and mental comfort.

Besides architecture (and no, Professor Linksdenger, architecture is not merely a matter of subjective tastes--there are universal values at work, just as there are with

human rights), India is deficient in all of the other fields of visual art. Even the great Rajastani or Mughal schools of miniature painting produced works of masterful craftsmanship that decorate, not art of the soul-searching Western variety. The finest Indian miniatures are all reward and no challenge, and they seek only to illustrate or record, never to penetrate and understand. The great cave paintings are storybooks, not revelations. In the history of Indian painting, there is no Giotto or Rublev, let alone Rembrandt, Turner or Picasso. It is as if the eye cannot be bothered with anything not self-evident. Today, a visit to the hot gallery of the moment in any of India's major cities brings you face to face with painting that is phenomenally poor in conception and execution and, at best, hopelessly derivative (although, admittedly, these are tough times for painting everywhere). Indian films favor color and spectacle over artful visual composition, and so on. Indeed, the only visual triumph produced by Indian culture is the exceptional saree, which may be the most beautiful female costume in the world.

Yet, if its inward focus stunts its visual sense, India has performed remarkable feats in other cultural arenas. The best-known successes today are in literature. Contemporary Indian writers (and some earlier ones, as well) have seized the English language as fully their own and, in terms of sheer prose quality, they produce the best English-language fiction in the world. Now, there are deficiencies in Indian fiction, such as extravagances masking too many commonalities and an embrace of the clever at the expense of the profound, and Indian literature's current vogue in the United States reminds one of the fads for Hermann Hesse in the late 'sixties and for Latin American literature in the 'seventies. Ultimately, many books will be forgotten--but others are likely to endure.

Is it so great a stretch from conquering the English language with imperial facility to mastering computer languages? Language, too, is a code--of far more subtlety than software. And educated Indians speak multiple languages--even before counting the digital dialects of IT.

The Indians have taken the Western-developed form of the novel as their own--a profoundly-coded art form that translates the outer world into inner, highly-personalized experience--and it will be interesting to see what comes of it after the current splashing around (recent works by more emotionally-mature writers, such as Vikram Chandra and Pankaj Mishra, make me optimistic); meanwhile, the Indian creative re-arrangements of the contents of the novel, stealing ideas from elsewhere and synthesizing them into their own product, puts me in mind of the computer at which I sat in Bangalore--it was a Compaq, running on Microsoft, but used by Indians for their own ambitious purposes.

Will Indian software writers take the step India's literary set has already completed and make IT truly their own, rather than simply elaborating Western developments? For me at least, the biggest question as regards the future of India's IT engagement will be the degree to which India's techies can abrogate and supplant Western approaches. That, and that alone, will determine whether India becomes an IT power, or remains an IT colony.

Given Indian successes in literature, IT and mathematics, I cannot help believing that the Hindu tradition (specifically the Hindu, of India's multiple traditions) has developed in its inheritors an affinity for complex mental codes.

The parallel between Indian music--that richest of all art forms in any culture--and IT abilities seems even more obvious. Indian music may sound undifferentiated to Western sensibilities (one evening, in a restaurant where I was enraptured by the Bird-and-Diz improvisational brilliance of a young, sitar-centered ensemble, an elderly American at the next table complained angrily to the manager that "everything sounded the same" and was getting on his nerves), but a closer acquaintance with it reveals wonderful riches. Personally, the most electrifying musical experience of my life was hearing Ravi Shankar play in Florence back in 1979, and what always strikes me about Indian classical music (speaking as an astonishingly untalented musician myself) is its fluid complexity--its mutable codes. Falling between strict forms and jazz (imagine a happy marriage between Bach and Coltrane), Indian formal music shimmers and shifts with digital facility. But the most impressive aspect is the Indian use of poly-rhythms--the tabla drummer playing (not only tonally but) a shifting series of distinctly-different but ultimately-complimentary rhythms with each hand, long arcs of "code" that meet at critical junctures. The rhythmic complexity of Indian classical music still has no parallel in the West, and the experiments with poly-rhythms by Western jazz musicians and formal composers over the last half century remain child's play in comparison. The rhythms embedded in a raga are often so complex that even trained Western musicians can't "count" or read them. Essentially, the rhythms are simultaneous realities, equally valid and, ultimately, collusive. Sound like advanced programming?

All this may be coincidence, and time may show that Indians have no more and no less innate understanding of the realms of IT than Bostonians, Berliners or the masses of Beijing. I simply believe it's worth thinking about.

*Girls! Girls! Girls!*  
*or*  
*Who's Saree Now?*

Another area in which India has made swift and admirable progress since independence is in the expansion of women's rights and opportunities. Indeed, the liberation of women, not that of nations, was the most important development of the twentieth century. Although that liberation has been uneven, to say the least, and there is still a long way to go globally, the impact of the introduction of women into education systems and workforces has unleashed energies so profound it likely will be a few more centuries before we can fully appreciate the effects. Meanwhile, grrrrl power is rich and real, and should be welcome to us all (without

exception, cultures that continue to oppress women will be non-competitive in the twenty-first century).

In the United States, the massive shift of women into the active economy is the primary factor behind the explosive growth of our wealth, as we maximize the use of our human capital and operate with unprecedented efficiency and unleashed creativity. Indian women, on average, still lag far behind American women in *observed* rights and opportunities, but they have had to come a much longer distance.

Although the ice is beginning to melt where its surfaces have been struck by global sunlight, India remains a society whose interior is frozen in tradition. While early Hindu culture appears to have been far more open regarding a woman's place in the world than Pauline Christianity, traditional Judaism or, certainly, Islam as practiced since the mid-fifteenth century, the Indian perception of the female's acceptable roles diminished and calcified over time--not least, I suspect, because of the centuries of conquest by and contact with Islamic invaders, for whom a woman seen was a woman compromised. Indian women must fight their way out from under multiple practical, customary and psychological layers of oppression.

Despite the appearance of warrior maharanees now and again, by the time the British presence was generally felt, the women of India, no matter their faith, were little more than beasts of burden, subordinate to the husband in life and death. While lurid accounts of *suttee*, or *sati*, the immolation of the living widow upon the husband's death, were consumed all too avidly by a sensation-hungry West, the practice--outlawed by the British two centuries ago, against popular resistance--is now overly soft-pedaled by Indian historians. And when, a decade ago, a controversial case of alleged forcible widow-burning by the deceased-husband's relatives made headlines, many an Indian denied that such a thing could happen in today's India.

But today's India remains many Indias. Even in jeans-swathed Bangalore, you will see a few fully-veiled, black-robed Muslim women haunting the boulevards like specters from the past. And those mighty gaps between rich and poor, urban and rural, between religions and regions, mean that, while some Indian women are solving software riddles, their sisters are still breaking up rocks with those sledgehammers mentioned above, or laboring in the fields under timelessly-harsh conditions, or carrying water cans upon their heads for miles (the introduction nation-wide of simple, dependable water pumps along roads, in villages and in urban slums has been another wonderfully-valuable program undertaken by the Indian government, although a great deal of money reportedly disappeared in the process). Worse still, Indian brides, especially at the lower socio-economic levels, are still virtually the property of their husbands' families, and savage violence toward them, often the result of faltering dowry payments, is reported with sufficient frequency in the press to make it clear that, in this family-as-fortress society, far more unreported abuse is going on.

The dowry issue itself continues to frustrate progressive Indians. Now illegal, the payment of dowries continues unabated, and a father "cursed" with daughters may find that the effort to raise dowry money for them becomes the primary goal of his life beyond elementary survival. Certainly, there has been progress.

Nowadays, a good education and a visa to work or live abroad may well suffice for a girl's dowry in lieu of a cash payment, and I know of at least one young Indian man who refused any dowry payment from his wife's family (he did get a beauty for a bride, though). But I can also cite another Indian, a father of two daughters, whose prime working years are now devoted to his efforts to raise about ten thousand dollars for each of their dowries--an enormous sum for a member of the always-precarious lower-middle or upper-working classes in India.

Women are, still, regarded as lesser forms than men. But each year brings progress, and the educational system is, perhaps, the greatest practical tool to build equality. Sometimes, outsiders even mistake willingly-accepted custom for oppression. For example, arranged marriages are, in most cases, not heartless impositions, and Americans who develop contacts with Indians will be surprised by the number of highly-educated young Indians who feel no reservations about letting their parents select their mates (admittedly, I would not have wanted my mother choosing a wife for me). And there normally is a chance for the prospective bride or groom to say no during the vetting process. But the majority of Indians remain genuinely convinced that arranged marriages are more apt to endure than "love matches," and statistics seem to bear them out.

Curiously, those dreadful, ever-identical Bollywood films, whose climaxes invariably feature inane songs and worse dancing (reminiscent, in a down-market way, of the American musical films of the Depression-era, when we, too, hungered for mindless, reassuring brightness), are almost always about romantic love that triumphs in the end.

Yes, India has had a woman prime minister and the United States has yet to elect a female president. But Indira Gandhi wasn't elected as a woman, but as Nehru's daughter (she was no direct relation to Mohandas K. Gandhi, by the way). Instinctively-authoritarian and dynastically-disposed, Mrs. Gandhi displayed the fascist temperament that prefers the masses to the people, and it is a tribute to the resilience of Indian democracy that she could only wound and not kill it. She bears a greater share of the responsibility for India's pervasive corruption than any other individual (her chosen-heir son, Sanjay, was a nonentity whose death in an air crash spared India his rule, while her less-favored son, Rajiv, called forth from deep reserve, did an enormous amount of good for India's modernization and liberalization before he was, like his mother, assassinated by a "wronged" ethnic minority).

In India, women have excelled in literature, the media, and, famously, in the IT sector, although, numerically, most educated Indian women holding down jobs still work as teachers, while their uneducated sisters are likeliest to work in the garment industry, if they work at all--a situation similar to that in the United States fifty years ago. Inroads into traditional industry and manufacturing have developed more slowly, but a start has been made. In the political field, Indian women have proven equal to males in their talents for both legislation and corruption. Their contributions have been indispensable in the medical field, and doubtless will continue to develop. The point is not that everything is getting ever better in the best of all possible worlds--it isn't--but that expanding opportunities really are there, at least for the relatively privileged and the lucky. And that is a

beginning that has rocketed India ahead of most of its neighbors in terms of both human decency and developmental potential.

*That Old Time Religion*  
*or*  
*The St. Valentine's Day Massacre, Part Two*

On February 14th, 2001, well-organized Hindu fundamentalists, responding to their leadership's howls that the celebration of Valentine's Day was lascivious, corrupting and subversive, shattered the windows and wrecked the interiors of shops displaying Valentine's Day cards and trinkets for sale, protested at hotels and restaurants offering Valentine's Day special meals or packages, defaced advertisements, harassed the suspect, and ranted and raved in the manner so beloved of benevolent gods everywhere. An affectation of upper-crust Indians taken over from the Brits, the longstanding and innocuous "celebration" of Valentine's Day hardly led to picturesque orgies or the ruination of youth in India's hands-off, sexually-lethargic social culture. But fundamentalist leaders and politicians have to stoke their fires, and Valentine's Day seemed like a handy bit of fuel.

Indian responses to questions about Hindu extremism, when asked of Hindus, tend to divide between the responses of embarrassed emigres and those of more forthright residents of India. Emigres tend to downplay religious differences in India--indeed, many young Indian IT workers in the States remind me of well-educated young Iranians in the mid-nineteen-seventies who really didn't see Islamic fundamentalism as a problem. Now, for a variety of reasons, I don't expect India to be taken over by a Hindu version of the Ayatollah Khomeini, but I do believe that India's Western-toned intelligentsia underestimates the power of religious hatred, despite immediate evidence to the contrary.

When speaking to those emigres who dismiss any serious threats from Hindu fundamentalists, you will often get an interesting secondary response if you press them with specifics. At some point, they will (often, not always) retreat into an irate declaration that "the Muslims have plenty of countries of their own," but "Hindus only have one homeland," making it sound rather as if those eight-hundred-million-plus Hindus who compose over four-fifths of India's society are something of an endangered species--or at least as embattled as Israel.

In India, once you have built just a bit of initial trust with a Hindu interlocutor, you will get comments about Muslims that will sound distressingly familiar to African-American readers of this report: "Muslims don't want to work." "Muslims don't care about education." "They just aren't as intelligent." "They're good craftsmen, but they're not suited for mental work." "They're backward." "They can't be trusted." "They expect everything to be handed to them." "They're

always having more children." Along with hints that Muslims are sexual predators and, of course, criminally-disposed.

At one level, India is suffering from the same sort of growing pains that much of the world is undergoing, from Christian, blue-collar America (with its remarkably un-Christian extremism) to the supremely-threatened, archaic, fatally-repressed Islamic world. Those threatened with loss of status and power by modernisation turn against modernisation--but also against different religious or ethnic groups living next door, whether or not the other group is reaping superior benefits from the same processes that threaten Mustapha, Mikey or Mohandas. Threatened, human beings and animals lash out. Those whose security lies within traditional religion, traditional customs and traditional employment patterns are threatened more vividly than ever before in history, by challenges to tradition, authority and their mode of employment. Terrorism and civil violence is the domain of the loser--and globalizing India is going to have a lot of losers.

India makes a fascinating case study, half as backward as the Islamic world, half with a long tradition of absorbing and digesting the foreign and the new. The contrast between social rigidities and synthetic qualities manifested in Indian society is even more pronounced than in East Asian societies, such as the Chinese, South Korean and Japanese. India is apt to do fairly well, though far from perfectly, at dealing with the challenges posed by globalization over the long term. But, all along the way, extreme fundamentalists (Hindu and Muslim) will fight often-violent holding actions against the future. And, if Indian politicians continue their present practice of inciting sectarian passions, India's progress may be washed in blood.

During my stay in India, the Taliban government in Afghanistan--champion over-achievers when it comes to disregarding all human decency--threatened, then carried out, the destruction of the giant stone Buddhas of Bamiyan Province. The initial Indian reaction was to join the world in attacking the bigotry and savagery of the Afghans in destroying monuments to other religions and world cultural treasures. The Hindu response was absolutely gleeful--you sensed that their protests against the actual destruction were insincere, since the act gave them such a delicious opportunity to take a whack at Muslim backwardness. But then the most important institution in India, its press (of which more below), spoiled the party by pointing out in scattered commentaries that there was an uncomfortable similarity between the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas and the destruction of the Ayodha Mosque in northern India by Hindu fanatics in the 'nineties. Retorts by Hindu fundamentalists that it wasn't the same at all, since the mosque had been built, centuries ago, on the ruins of a Hindu temple commemorating the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram, sounded rather hollow, and India's complaints about the destruction of the Buddhas, although they continued, were chastened. The press had done exactly what a free press is supposed to do--it spoiled mean fun and deflated self-righteousness. But that is another story.

Simultaneously, rumors began to circulate that Hindu or Buddhist students in Delhi had burned a Koran to protest the destruction of the Buddhas. In response, members of the Students' Islamic Movement of India and Muslim gangs rioted in Kanpur, the industrial capital of the troubled state of Uttar Pradesh. The rioters

closed down the city for a week, gutting buildings and drawing in para-military forces and armored cars, resulting in sixteen or seventeen more deaths to add to the 450 killed since 1991 in Kanpur's religious violence. This time around, the police claimed they could not stop the rioting because several of the slum "residential colonies" had been turned into fortresses over the years and could not be penetrated even in periods of calm. Meanwhile, Hindu extremists demanded that the construction of a new Hindu temple on the site of the destroyed mosque that had been built on the site of a destroyed Hindu temple go ahead at once (it a hallmark of religious primitivism that believers see themselves as God's real-estate agents, whether in Bamiyan, Ayodhya or Jerusalem).

All this put Prime Minister Vajpayee's government in a difficult situation (soon to be complicated by the tehelka.com scandal, of which more below). Atal Behari Vajpayee may prove to be the most-effective, best-attuned prime minister India has had since independence. He is considered personally honest (no small thing in Indian politics) and he recognizes the need for economic liberalization and global engagement. A pleasant surprise to many, he is spoken of by intellectuals in terms reminiscent of those used to describe German chancellor Helmut Schmidt back in the 'seventies: "Right man, wrong party."

The problem, of course, is that the dominant party in the present coalition government--and Mr. Vajpayee's own party--is the Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, a spawn of the long-standing Hindu fundamentalist movement and committed to a form of religious nationalism as unattractive in its actions as it is antiquated in its mentality. Now, there is a good chance that what we are seeing is the "Only Nixon could have gone to China" model at work, in which only a leader with fundamentalist credentials and backing can open India to the world and its markets without tearing the country apart--or, at least, faltering in his efforts. And Mr. Vajpayee, who is a bright, decent, dedicated man with a winning sense of humor, has, thus far, done a remarkable job of steering India toward the future--while avoiding excesses of extremism. Given time, he may prove to be the most important individual in India in half a century--but his government is under constant threat, given India's inappropriate parliamentary system with its unstable governments (as various others have pointed out over the decades, Indian democracy likelier would be less corrupt and more effective under a presidential system--as a minimum, it might reduce the constant party jumping by opportunistic legislators who think nothing of harming their motherland for slight personal gains).

But even if Mr. Vajpayee does not disappoint us, India's history suggests that he will not be able to stop all outbursts of religious violence. And his own party is torn, with its extreme wings calling for the "Indianization" of all religions other than Hinduism--a chilling call in the ears of India's Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and others. While religious violence is downplayed by embarrassed Indians--especially emigres--as recently as the early 'nineties thousands of Muslims and Hindus were massacred in India's major cities at the time of the Ayodhya Mosque's destruction. Since then, smaller-scale sectarian violence has continued here and there--while significant violence has rocked Kashmir, with

routine factional killings and, on both sides, the sort of cynicism and casual brutality that long-term civil strife always engenders.

Of course, India began its independence as a dismembered country, with Pakistan sliced away to create a safe haven for British India's Muslims. Probably inevitable, the partition nonetheless seems tragic in retrospect. After three wars, several minor conflicts, countless skirmishes and the forcible creation of Bangladesh from East Pakistan, two nuclear-armed states are no closer to a productive accommodation than they were in the early days of freedom, when over a million Hindus and Muslims may have died in the butchery that attended the population transfers between the two new countries.

As regards religion, India is the Balkans writ very large. At different times, each major confession has had its turn at oppressing the others. Resurgent Hinduism drove Buddhism northeastward, then Islamic invaders subjugated much, though not all, of Hindu India. While Indians may speak fondly of the Mughal emperor Akbar, with his respect for all religions, it is Aurangzeb who is burned into the Hindu consciousness: intolerant, punitive and bloody-handed, determined to extinguish Hindu principalities with fire and sword (in the end, Aurangzeb's strained and very expensive efforts fatally weakened Mughal rule, in a bit of poetic justice). Then the British came and their evenhanded condescension disappointed India's Christians (a community held to have existed in South India since a visit by Doubting Thomas, the disciple of Jesus). India's Christians gained no special privilege and, indeed, were considered rather presumptuous in their assumption of Christian equality, given the dark tone of their skins. All in all, the British were the most tolerant rulers India ever had, with the exception, perhaps, of Akbar, but even they managed to ignite the brutal Great Mutiny through a comedy of errors that were not at all funny to John Company's Hindu and Muslim troops.

The independence movement struggled to reconcile different religious factions, but with little enduring success. In Bengal and elsewhere, the *swadeshi* (self-reliance) movement pitted landowners of one faith against merchants of another, Hindu intellectuals against Muslim peasants, and community against community. Gandhi pleaded for a multi-religious state within British India's borders, but we must remember that it is always easier for a representative of the majority to make such a plea. Jinnah, the father of Pakistan, was not convinced that Muslims could ever get a fair deal in a Hindu-dominated India. And so on...

Today, daily life muddles on. But the Islamic minority left behind by the creation of Pakistan remains, statistically, poorer and less educated than India's other primary religious groups. Also, in a horrible act of folly uncharacteristic of his progressive attitude, Rajiv Gandhi, for political advantage, engineered the reintroduction of Sharia law for the Muslim community, while the constitution (a superb example of high intentions and a composite of Western documents) continues to apply to Hindus and others, giving Hindu fundamentalists a legitimate accusation of Muslims being "favored" (an accusation that Hindus often bring up in other regards, as well). Also, Sharia law condemns Muslims to backwardness--especially women, for whom the ease with which a man may divorce his wife under Sharia is no laughing matter.

Certainly, there is plenty of prejudice to go around. Christianity is, at present, newly threatening to Hindu fundamentalists, since its egalitarian message and embrace of the poor appeals to those at the bottom of the caste system. Long strong in the south, Christianity has been making in-roads elsewhere, with the result that evangelists have been murdered (along with uppity new Christians), churches burned, and plots "discovered" to Christianize India. Increasingly, the actions and pronouncements of Hindu extremists make the Ku Klux Klan in its heyday seem temperate and rational in comparison--all this an especial tragedy, since Hinduism has long been a classically-tolerant religion, sufficiently confident to embrace new influences.

Muslims, on the other hand, don't much care for Hindus, and accuse Jains and Parsis of being bloodsuckers, vicious moneylenders and notorious pawnbrokers living off the impoverished Faithful (sound chillingly familiar to anyone?).

The Sikhs, too, had their independence-from-India movement over the last few decades. Suppressed, at least for now, it led to serial brutalities and the Indian government's infamous butcheries in the Golden Temple.

I do not believe that religious violence is likely to rend India into pieces. But I do believe that sudden eruptions of religious violence, varied in scale, will continue to mar Indian society. As modernization and globalization continue, with the inevitable worker dislocations, threats to tradition, generational divides, disparities in wealth and losses of security (perhaps the latter, above all) for those on the losing end of tomorrow, India should prepare for the likelihood of intensified religious hatred and violence. It is an enormous challenge, and the present tendency of Indian intellectuals to downplay the danger makes them culpable.

Whether Mr. Vajpayee will be able to control his own followers will be a crucial test of India's right to the full respect of other democracies.

*Tom Paine, Lincoln Steffens and Mr. Gupta*

Indians never resemble Americans more closely than when they are complaining about the press. They insist that the press is partisan, bought-off, in the pockets of the powerful, has its own agenda, doesn't provide balanced coverage, and so on. Yet, to an outsider with some slight knowledge of the world, India's media are impressively honest, determined to get the story right--and to get the story out into the light of day--and, often, courageous. Certainly, some publications have a bias--often unattractive--but the sheer competition between India's notably-unrestrained media outlets, the vigor of Indian reporting, and the unshackled spunk so long restrained in the Indian character together result in a very encouraging and lively array of newspapers, magazines, news and talk shows, and muckraking media investigations. Without its free media, India might long

since have become a very dark place. The free press is democracy's greatest friend--a maxim as true in India as it is in the United States.

In India, where corruption infects the limbs of government like a long-untreated cancer, the news media are the primary manifestation of the nation's conscience. Those newspapers and news reports speak for the man in the street who often does not dare to speak for himself. One provincial Indian whom I quite admired told me tales of how corruption had touched his own life and the lives of those around him--then he shook his head and added, "If I tried to do anything...to say anything publicly...I would be killed." And he was not necessarily exaggerating. The total of political killings (usually murders to preserve local authority) in India over the last thirty years appears to dwarf the number of political killings by such vilified regimes as Pinochet's Chile, Castro's Cuba or even in many of the old Warsaw Pact governments. Of course, India is bigger--but it also gets a pass internationally because of its old "non-aligned" development-struggle credentials. Indeed, India is in the almost unique situation of needing to rely entirely on internal criticism, since well-intentioned outsiders are so reluctant to point out its failings.

If all politics is local, most of India's political murders certainly are. But the national press and the major dailies throughout the country have shown remarkable courage and ingenuity in reporting on the nation's problems--including those with party thugs and partisan assassins. Overall, Indian papers are surprisingly good on domestic matters, but weaker in their often-tendentious and always self-righteous (when not bigoted) coverage of international affairs. Truly reflecting the national temperament, their greatest sin against objectivity is a reflexive tendency to blame the West for all the deficiencies of the East.

The ingenuity of India's media has been enhanced by the advent of the internet--not only a power in its own right, but a sort of fertilizer that provokes the traditional media to a new maturity. Recently, one internet concern, *tehelka.com*, organized a very complex, gutsy and sophisticated sting operation that traced corruption as high as some of the prime minister's trusted advisers (although there was no evidence of corruption on the part of Mr. Vajpayee himself). Masquerading as foreign arms merchants, the *tehelka.com* team entered the competition to provide the Indian military with night-vision devices, which are needed urgently for operations in Kashmir. What startled the Indian public was not that bribes were readily accepted--that's a commonplace--but how casual it all was, how small the bribes might be (one to two thousand dollars for highly-placed officials and officers), and how high up this business-as-usual corruption went. Generals, party chiefs and cabinet members found themselves in untenable positions, and the military, generally regarded as one of India's least-corrupt institutions, revealed itself as craven at the national staff level. Of course, the very worst opposition politicians sought to use the scandal to their own ends (some things are as truly global as they are timeless), but the important aspect of the affair was that the media did its job so well. *Tehelka.com* got it all on hours upon hours of videotape--and the other media ran with the story, re-playing the tapes until I had almost memorized them. There was never any question of suppression of the news or of a general cover-up. Democracy was very well-served--and with relish.

India owes its tradition of freedom of the press not least to the British, of course, but the crucial factor was that independent India's founding fathers were bookish men who themselves had exploited the British reluctance to censor. No less than Tom Paine or Thomas Jefferson, India's heroes of independence believed in the importance of a free press--later, when Indira Gandhi tried to muzzle the media, it backfired on her. At various times, the press has been sullied, or bullied or, very occasionally, muzzled. But press freedom has not only survived in India, it has prospered. This is one of the few developmental advantages India has over China, and it will be fascinating to discover, over the coming decades, just how important a factor freedom of information is in the developmental process.

The Indian press is, on average, poorly-written, lacking in perspective, and anachronistically anti-American. And I can't help admiring it enormously.

### *The Villain on the Traffic Island*

In any Indian city, the cow blocking traffic at a major intersection receives a great deal more respect than the policeman directing the traffic. And with good reason.

If Americans and Indians are similar in their spoiled attitudes toward the media, they are utterly dissimilar in their attitudes toward law enforcement officials. While Americans on the fringes of society may distrust the police under specific circumstances, our attitude toward law enforcement is overwhelmingly one of trust, confidence and very high expectations. Within India, I never encountered a single person who had a single good word for any of India's police forces, and I have met only one emigre Indian who has any positive regard for them (and that for specific units and officials). As in so many developing or underdeveloped countries, India's police are poorly-paid, resulting in an insatiable appetite for bribes; poorly-trained, resulting in slight effectiveness; poorly-administered, resulting in lassitude and dereliction of duty; and poorly-disciplined, resulting in criminal behavior.

This is a country where bandits (*dacoits* in Indian parlance) haunt major highways by night, and where many slums and even some campuses have laws of their own.

Many of the questions I had for Indians required a period of trust-building, or at least persistence, before I could get a meaningful, honest-sounding answer. But the moment I mentioned the police, even to the newest and slightest of acquaintances, I only had to sit back and switch into the receive mode--the problem was generally turning off the stream of invective once I'd heard enough. The dislike for and distrust of the police were absolutely ferocious--the mildest reactions were disgust and resignation. This matters. No matter how fine a nation's constitution, if the man or woman on the street does not encounter ethical, useful behavior on the part of the government's first line of contact, a people

cannot develop the trust and confidence required to build a modern civil society. Corrupt law enforcement officials, even if they only impose unjustified minor traffic fines, put honest citizens into the position of criminals--always on guard, distrustful, fearful and evasive.

Sitting in the Maryland livingroom of an emigre Indian a few months back, the conversation got on to whether or not he eventually would take his family back to India, since they clearly missed their relatives very deeply. He said, wistfully, that he preferred to remain in the U.S. When asked why, he didn't cite material advantage, but said simply that he and his family were safer here. Now, this man was no dissident who needed political asylum, and he came from a relatively prosperous and developed area of India (Hyderabad). But lurid accounts of American criminality aside, a few years in the United States had taught him, beyond question, that his family's most basic welfare--freedom from violence, partiality and crime--was far better assured in Montgomery County. "Here," he said, "when you call the police, they come. And they do what they're supposed to do."

The next section will deal with Britain's legacy to India, which I, unfashionably, see as strikingly positive. But one negative aspect deserves mention here: While the British lavished attention upon their military establishment in India and left behind a strong ethos of service and (the occasional scandal notwithstanding) rectitude among the officer corps and in the ranks, the British paid far less attention to the quality of their police at the lower levels. The Brits took the military seriously, officering it as best they could and keeping it honed for the empire's defense. But, as far as police work went, the British just wanted things quiet. So the Indian police were able to behave high-handedly and, often, brutally in their own loosely-supervised spheres, which the British rarely understood or much cared about. Certainly, Britain sent out some worthy police administrators and functionaries. But at the "beat-level," Indian policing was never better than uneven, and it was often corrupt and cruel, based upon officials much more apt to wield their *lathis* than the law. It also demands to be said that there are, indeed, dedicated policemen in India today, patriots who dearly want to improve their country or, at least, their city. But they do not form part of the average Indian's experience.

Today's Indian police are supremely Third World in their respect for their own uniforms, delighting in their authority and power. Yet, I can have some sympathy with them (since I don't have to live there). Woefully underpaid, they, too, have families for which they wish to provide decent lives. Reform of India's many different police establishments is vital and long-overdue--but it cannot be done through draconian measures alone. Higher standards cannot succeed without higher pay, which poses a difficult challenge for poor countries (especially for one as populous as India). But if India wishes to become a truly modern nation, it must clean up the police. The cop out there on the traffic island should be entitled to at least as much respect as the cow running the red light.

## *The British Legacy*

India will not be a fully-mature state until its people can evaluate the British legacy objectively. At present, Indians overwhelmingly fall prey to the Greek-plumber Syndrome (in Athens, whenever the plumbing broke, Greeks blamed the CIA). Unable and unwilling to reckon the tremendous advantages Britain's centuries of influence had upon India, Indians continue to blame the British (or "Britishers," as Indians call them) for their most challenging problems.

It remains, of course, terribly bad form to suggest that any colonial regime anywhere might have had the slightest positive effect on anything, and we are all expected to subscribe to the notion that the wretched of the earth are wretched because Europeans made them so. But we, on our part, will not be academically mature until we stop the boo-hoo mumbo-jumbo about endless, boundless oppression and recognize that the five-hundred-year phenomenon of European colonialism was tremendously varied in its effects, from the horrific destruction of indigenous American populations on the negative side to the very positive legacy of constitutional law elsewhere. There was a difference between the British and the Belgians, between *A Passage to India* and *Heart of Darkness*. We must admit that not all colonial powers were created equal--any more than all native cultures were uniformly glorious and good (my favorite bit of historical revisionism is Neil Young's musical reconstruction of the Aztecs as kindly and benevolent).

Certainly, Britain made mistakes in India, most notably the failure to adequately reform and render equitable the system of rural taxation (the British were far too ready to leave existing authority structures in place, and native landowners--*zamindars*--and their tax agents continued to squeeze the peasantry as they had been doing for centuries). The casual introduction of class awareness, piled on top of India's grim caste prejudices, made the most fortunate Indians insufferable and even more insensitive than they already had been. Britain trained clerks, not potential leaders, in its colonial education system. At the local level, the police focused on order and control, rather than on justice for the common man. The British developed India's economy unevenly and industrialization was, in the interest of British manufacturers, spotty and belated. The British were unforgivably slow to figure out the need for and mechanics of famine relief. Not least, an exhausted Britain left too precipitously, with Dickie Mountbatten patting himself on the back all the way and leaving a massive sectarian slaughter in his wake.

But consider the good: The ideas and tools of democracy. The belief in the sanctity of a constitution. The tradition of a free and vigorous press. A high-court system that remains the most trusted branch of government. The English language, which both serves to bind together the disparate peoples of India, who speak eighteen major languages and hundreds of dialects, and which gives India a huge advantage in a globalizing world (Pakistan, under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, threw away the advantage of English and thus threw away the country's future). An unprecedented territorial unity for the subcontinent. A belief, exploited by the

independence movement, in basic human rights. A superb rail network, which Indian neglect has not yet been able to destroy. A sturdy network of roads, upon which independent India neglected to build. Excellent, though now decaying and obsolescent ports. An educational system, however imperfect, on a scale and of a quality that no other colonial power provided anywhere and that enabled India's struggle for independence. Efforts at sanitation and public health--often crippled by Hindu or Muslim religious prejudice (during a ten-year epidemic of plague at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, the British had to use force against Indians determined to protect rats from extermination, since rats are sacred to the Hindu god Ganesha). The best functional architecture in India--and the most beautiful. The novel as a form, which India has made its own. The list could be continued for a very long time, down to the most trivial features of daily life.

Yet, Indians are still embarrassed by the colonial era, and cannot quite explain to themselves how it all happened. How did the British manage to do what they did and to last so long?

One of the most important parts of the answer is that the British found India disunited--as it always had been--and effectively played Indians one against the other. Without Indian complicity, the British could never have conquered, let alone ruled India. Even the Great Mutiny of 1857, transmuted by Indians desperate for heroes and heroism into their First War of Independence, could not have been put down had not the majority of Indians remained either loyal to their British masters or apathetic. The Mutiny fell apart not only as a result of British military competence and ferocity, but because of in-fighting, disloyalty and indiscipline on the Indian side--mutineers, bandits and common people on a bloody lark killed far more of their other-faith neighbors than they did sahibs and memsahibs. Again and again, the British did the impossible because Indians themselves made it possible. And even at the last, with independence looming, far more Indians regretted the development than today's Indians are willing to accept (much as Americans have slighted the extent of Toryism during our own Revolution). Finally, independence was accompanied by the often-brutal forced incorporation of various states, such as Hyderabad, which had enjoyed (overwatched) autonomy and relative prosperity under the British and wanted no part of rule by imperious northern Indians.

It is a great shame that Indians cannot embrace the other benefits derived from the British interval as openly as they do cricket. Just as Indians now accept the Mughal heritage as their own, perhaps they will, one day, be able to come to terms with the long stay of the British, who left so many of their bodies and bones behind to fertilize Indian soil (their graveyards are everywhere). Far from a distant, malevolent force, the British became a part of India, and their legacy on the subcontinent now belongs to India far more than it does to that rainy little island of retreat, where so many miracles happened for so long. Britain's influence is enduring, indelible and worthy of respect. India should cherish it.

It only saddens me when I hear well-educated young Indians rail about all the harm the British did, revealing their own narrowness of thought and ultimate deficiency of education. I remember, especially, one otherwise-intelligent young

woman ranting about how, without English oppression, India would have become an industrial power a century ago, while a bright male flippantly told me that, even without the British, the railroads would have come, maybe ten or twenty years later than they did. This is historical revisionism at its least considered. More likely, without the British, India would have remained as industrially-backward as China did, entering the twentieth century with scraps of development on its coast and an interior unchanged over countless centuries. As for railroads, of course they might have come--but fewer of them would have been built, and those would have arrived seventy or eighty years later, at the earliest, as they did in other Asian states. India, as a unified state, most probably would not have existed--yet, the myth of the stymied miracle haunts India.

The British arrived in force in the mid-seventeen-hundreds, after a century as a steadily-growing trading presence on the coasts. They entered a combustible India, riven by the collapse of the Mughal empire and the rise of regional warlords. Lawlessness abounded, violence was commonplace, and culture had decayed. If we must engage in historical what-ifs, then we have to ask whether India, without the British, might not have entered a long period of destructive civil wars which would have turned the clock backward? And an India as developmentally-retarded as China was at the beginning of the twentieth century might have seen upheavals and horrors on the Chinese scale over the past hundred years, rather than an imperfect, but finally-admirable democracy. Without the British legacy, autocracy might have triumphed throughout Asia.

The extent of Britain's influence on today's India can--and will--be argued, but it is incontestable that the British left India in a better condition than the one in which they found it, which is a remarkable thing to say about a European colonial power.

As with individuals, the inability or unwillingness of a state or its people to accept responsibility for their own inadequacies and failures is a mark of immaturity--and a comforting excuse for inaction. Those who blame others for dragging them down rarely lift themselves up.

Oh, and that young woman ranting about all the bad turns England had done to her country? She was speaking English, in a very posh British accent.

#### **4. THE STRATEGIC CONTEXT**

##### *The Dilemma of Identity*

Readers who enjoy Indian literature will have recognized that the title of this report is a play on *The Home and the World*, Rabindranath Tagore's classic

Bengali novel of India's confusions. Since at least the arrival of the Mughals five centuries ago, the diverse people we call Indians have been trying to solve the problem of their identity. What might profitably be taken from the invader and incorporated? What must be shunned at all costs? Is there really a choice? And that classic question of societies seeking to put themselves right: What is to be done?

I chose as my title *A Home in the World?* because India is struggling to find its proper place among the world's states. Hampered psychologically (and otherwise) by the size of its population, India consistently claims a greater importance for itself than it has earned, and then it is frustrated to be seated, yet again, below the salt at the table of nations.

As anyone can tell by the order of presentation in this report, my personal interests lie in the collisions within and between cultures: Why do people behave as they do? What makes Sammy, or Rajiv, or Miguel run? I am fascinated by both differences and commonalities. On the other hand, I am ever less impressed by "great men" and current events, all of which are grains of sand, soon to be washed away by the waters of Chronos. Culture is the truest of all the forms of history, a great, living summation, from the culture of eating utensils (or the lack thereof) up to the most complex art forms. The gesture on the street corner and the Beethoven symphony chronicle all that we have been. I am endlessly fascinated by human beings, even on the days when I don't much like people.

But this report would be both incomplete and unacceptable without a few pages devoted to India's present and pending international dilemmas, most of which are exacerbated by India's national arrogance, lack of perspective, and remarkable ignorance of the world.

*The Western Terrorist Organization  
aka W.T.O.*

Credit for India's continued movement toward full membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) belongs first to a core of high-level politicians, not least Mr. Vajpayee and his canny finance minister, Jaswant Singh, and, second, to a general, partly-inchoate sense on the part of the minority of Indians who "matter" that a greater degree of globalization is inevitable. But there is powerful, bitter resistance.

India's demagogic politicians will oppose anything if they believe they can gain by opposing it (the Congress Party, initially the champion of liberalizing India's economy, is now fiercely opposed to further liberalization, since trade liberalization's current sponsor is the BJP and its governing coalition--which excludes Congress). These exuberantly-craven men and women play upon the fears of India's manufacturers, workers and farmers. For their part, the manufacturers (excepting the smartest and most powerful, who have already built

partnerships with foreign companies determined to enter the Indian market) dread a greater opening to the world, since the "permit-license raj" of bribes for monopoly rights has allowed them to grow rich by selling inferior products at high prices to captive consumers. Indian workers in threatened industries worry about losing their jobs--often justifiably. Given the lack of any safety net beyond the family, the Indian worker's life is always precarious--but he has also grown comfortable, in key industries, with low standards and shoddy performance. In one of the dazzling contradictions of humankind, Indians abroad (where they might reap meaningful rewards) are always among the hardest workers in their country of employment, while those in traditionally-secure jobs at home are among the world's least productive.

India's farmers are genuinely at risk, and, unlike industrial workers and bureaucrats, their plight merits consideration and sympathy. This is a country where the oxcart remains an important means of transportation, and Indian agriculture is small-scale, primitive, and operates on narrow margins and subsidies. Without a gradual and constructive program for their introduction, tariff-free agricultural imports from agribusiness states would ruin India's hundreds of millions of small farmers, agricultural workers and their families overnight--fueling an even more powerful exodus to cities already choked by webs of horrible slums, whose residents fled their harsh rural lives in hope of something better. India's cities, great and small, already operate at the outer edge of functionality. The collapse of domestic agricultural prices would overwhelm them.

Agriculture is a special case and, given India's difficult position, should be treated as such in all trade negotiations--not fully and unconditionally protected, but helped where it is reasonable to do so. Sudden liberalizations--shock therapy--work well in the realm of manufactured products and services, but agricultural transformations must happen in stages. As for India's industrialists, it is impossible to have any sympathy with them--they have been vampires sucking India's lifeblood for decades and, despite the current predictions of doom, most will adapt. Many workers will, indeed, face short-to-mid-term disruptions that may sound reasonable on paper but will shatter lives in reality. Yet, over the mid-to-long term (and sooner, for many), an opening to the world economy will create vastly more jobs in India than it destroys. Indian workers will, however, have to meet world standards for workplace behavior--which India's gangsterish unions will resist.

The globalization process, though inevitable, will not be smooth. Depending on economic tides and changes of government, progress already made may be undone. But forward movement, halting though it sometimes may be, *is* inevitable. In the process we will likely see continued trashings of foreign franchises and offices in India, as well as eventual kidnappings or killings of Western business executives. Strikes, plant occupations, attempted boycotts, the abrogation of contracts and the like will spoil deals and scare off a good number of potential investors and developers (as *The Economist* recently pointed out, foreign direct investment in India peaked in 1997). But the lure of India--both its realistic prospects and the vast-market fantasies of foreigners--ultimately will lead to global business supplying a substantial portion of India's needs--unless the central

government itself spoils things for everyone. Globalization is temporarily resistible--if a state is content to keep its citizens mired in poverty. The Enron debacle described above likely will set back foreign-investor confidence in large-scale projects for years, while crippling Indian development directly by the failure to increase desperately-needed electricity supplies--yet, other niches for investment will open, in other states.

To outsiders, a brief dose of Indian complaints about globalization can sound like the disingenuous anti-NAFTA comments of Americans who have benefited from our own protectionist policies. But, in India, the scale of the problem is far, far greater, and the depth of feeling is deeper. Indians must overcome a serious, often-reflexive distrust of foreign investors inculcated during decades of socialist rhetoric. Indians really do believe their country is a treasure house of vast wealth that foreigners are waiting to loot. As a result, every deal that encounters difficulties (such as the Enron project) will result in a xenophobic over-reaction, and vested interests within the country will use their government influence to wage partisan warfare against outsiders.

Ignorance of the greater world really is a core problem. With predictable and dreary regularity, I encountered Indians who had watched tourists buy armfuls of cheap, junk handicrafts destined for closets and basements. The Indians drew the conclusion that the West must be starved for those handicrafts. They simply had no idea of the tourist's mentality or of the sort of goods Westerners covet at home--and to which they have immediate access. There was also a belief that outsiders just want to put India's own producers out of business so they can flood India with goods made elsewhere and establish an economic form of colonialism. The Indian concept of capitalism is a mix of shabby-bazaar calculation and a conviction that all foreign corporations are predatory and inherently evil.

Fortunately, the past decade's liberalizations have shown demonstrable, positive results--and, again, the decisive classes have a sense that globalization is coming and that's that. The virtues of the market will win, in time. But, along the way, there will be plenty of vicious holding actions fought against the "new imperialists."

India's development could, in certain spheres and geographical regions, go surprisingly fast. The challenge will come from the majority of areas that lag behind. Some states, such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, may experience an increase in poverty--even as globalization promotes those Bangalore girls from Levi's to Versace.

Despite all of my criticisms of India, I am optimistic about its future--but mine is a piecemeal optimism.

## *The Pathetic Trappings of Power*

On the day I arrived in Mumbai/Bombay, an international naval review had just gotten underway. More than twenty countries participated (a U.S. Navy band, looking a bit bewildered, milled around the lobby of my hotel). The Indian government had cleaned up the section of the seafront foreign guests would see and filled the air with military planes to complement the sight of the ships in the harbor. Smog ungraciously hid both ships and aircraft from view much of the time, but the ballyhoo was resounding and the Indians were very pleased with themselves.

The intended message to the world was that India is a great power. Great powers have fleets, and India has one, too. With aircraft carriers! You could almost see government ministers jumping up and down, crying out, "You have to take us seriously, you have to take us seriously! We have a navy, just like you do..."

Never mind that this dreadfully-poor country wasted millions of dollars on the show. New Delhi has squandered far more upon a fleet that, faced with a serious opponent, would go to the bottom quicker than a handful of coins tossed into a bathtub. India needs a coast guard, not a navy. But New Delhi wants to strut upon the world stage.

Were India to face a threat from the sea in the out-years, it would come from China. Were such a conflict to occur, submarines might be of some utility to India, but the most lethal--and cost-effective--weapon would be airpower delivering precision munitions from stand-off points of release. Meanwhile, no other fleet threatens India (unless India really believes there's a chance that the U.S. Navy might attack, in which case they would need a lot more fleet than they're ever going to possess). Further, India has no reasonable or rational use for its navy, other than showing the flag. Certainly, coast guard-type cutters that can patrol territorial waters, pursuing pirates and other criminal operators, make sense. Also, troop carriers that could deliver forces to help address regional emergencies may be justified. But India's purchase of a blue-water navy is a grotesque crime against India's own people.

But great powers have navies...

One of the greatest tragedies of post-colonial states is that, even as they railed against their colonizers, they bought into the European concept of the state and its structures uncritically, whether or not the Euro-model state fit the local situation, culture or needs. Until the concept of the "tailored state" catches on--if it ever does--poor states will continue to waste their resources pretending to be rich states in form and organization.

The Indian air force appears to be another story. Since my research was unofficial, I had no direct contact with the Indian military, but, relying on trusted friends who have served with them, upon research and India's own sources, and,

finally, on looking casually over air bases or cantonment walls whenever they were nearby, a former soldier can make a few reasoned judgements.

One of those judgements is that India does, indeed, need an air force, and a bigger, better one than it has. Were we to allow, for the sake of argument, that India does have a legitimate sphere of influence, that sphere would be much smaller than New Delhi seems to imagine: it would lie entirely within aircraft range (India's sphere of *interest* is much greater, of course, but that is not of military relevance, except for the possibility of internationally-sanctioned peacekeeping missions). But India, with its post-independence genius for backing losing horses, tied itself to the Soviet block (then clung to Russia) and now has a wasting inventory of poor-quality aircraft for which spare parts are in fatally-short supply. While there are other foreign aircraft in the inventory, India relies primarily on Soviet- or Russian-built warplanes and, to a degree, on corresponding training and techniques. The introduction of the Indian designed and produced Light Combat Aircraft may alleviate the situation somewhat, but will not make India's air force a world-class fighting organization--which only U.S.-built aircraft, infrastructure and methodology can do (European aircraft are too expensive, lag technologically, and lack versatility). Of course, India doesn't need a world-class air force at present--not until a more pronounced threat develops from the Chinese--and it would not be in U.S. interests to aggravate the arms race in this volatile, impoverished region. India just needs a somewhat-better air force than it has.

India is not going to sell off its navy to support the air force. But it should.

The Indian army remains the nation's primary service. It is very much the pride of the nation--dutiful and less corrupt than other institutions (despite the *tehelka.com* scandal). Whether facing off with Pakistan or aiding in earthquake relief in Gujarat, the army demonstrates real value to the state and its people. And it is capable of winning any major wars that might arise on India's borders in the near-to-mid term (it tends, however, to fare less well in limited, localized conflicts, where it cannot apply straightforward military techniques and bring its numbers to bear). Pakistan, the traditional and most likely opponent at present, simply does not have the raw power to defeat the Indian military, no matter how valiant an attempt the Pakistani military might make.

But the Indian army remains primarily an old-fashioned infantry army. Even its motorized and mechanized components have poor, often-underpowered equipment. It is not competent to wage combined arms combat in a fully integrated manner. Joint operations are almost non-existent, except for set-piece demonstrations (in one of India's wars with Pakistan, the Indian army counterattacked into Pakistan without telling the air force it was going to do it--and not much seems to have changed). On the personnel side, Indian soldiers appear patriotic and motivated, and the officers are well-schooled, though their educations are, again, old-fashioned. But this is an army that lacks initiative at all levels, with a very authority-conscious officer corps whose careerists are unwilling to take risks. In take-that-hill situations, this army will perform well. But it is neither flexible nor agile. Against a top-quality opponent, India army units would perform unevenly, but select units would do very well in mountainous terrain (where they have long experience), fairly well in jungle, and, perhaps, surprisingly well in

urban environments, where their infantry strength and familiarity with the environment could be exploited by a commander of talent.

And the Indians do have commanders of talent. That is one theme that sounded again and again as I spoke with those who had worked with them at the general officer level, from the sub-continent to Sierra Leone.

One of the most attractive features of the Indian military has been its openness to India's various religious and ethnic groups. From traditional warrior backgrounds, Sikhs and Muslims compose a disproportionate share of personnel strength at all levels, but India's military has never wavered in its support of the nation, the government and democracy. There are fiefdoms and a general lack of institutional cooperation in peacetime, but the rank and file have, thus far, always come through for their motherland--Indian Muslims never leaned toward Pakistan, and so forth. India's military also has had the benefit of picking its officers--and even enlisted personnel--from among the elite of India's vast population. However, that situation is changing. It is a hallmark of India's economic development across the last decade that the best and the brightest, who traditionally sought military or other government careers (the traditional Third World model), increasingly want civil educations and careers in IT or other lucrative fields. Certainly, a huge, poor country such as India can still attract very fine raw material to military service, but the situation increasingly resembles that in more-developed countries, with the officer corps drawn from very good (but not the best) talents, from traditional military families, and, of course, from those in any society who are simply attracted to the mystique of military service.

As a rule, the Indian military could be expected to fight ferociously and bravely if faced with a threat to Indian territory. Expeditionary operations might not elicit the same level of doggedness from army units (and would face significant logistics challenges, even if small in scale). In a brief conflict, the air force could perform well tactically, but not strategically (except against Pakistan, where strategic targets lie within tactical range). It would have little staying power after an initial wartime surge. The navy exists primarily to drain the state's treasury and show the flag. The military as a whole is not sufficiently equipped and trained to develop synergies either within or between services. India's armed forces remain, in most senses, mid-twentieth-century in their capabilities and approaches to warfare.

### *The Elephant and the Dragon...*

In February, 2001, a cabinet minister from New Delhi crossed his country's eastern border to open an Indian-funded road connecting a small commercial center in Burma/Myanmar with a remote sliver of India. It was the first high-level Indian visit to Burma in years, and building that simple road was an unprecedented project between the two states--although both had been administered by the British viceroy of India. The Indian government publicly stressed the mutual benefits of

trade the road would bring to the two countries and generally exhibited a new and uncharacteristic interest in Rangoon/Yangon's good opinion.

All because of China.

When I visited Burma in 1996, I found a situation far more complex and disturbing than the black-and-white situation reported in the West. In-country, the quality and location of suffering had less to do with oppressed university students in major cities than with AIDS-ravaged tribal villagers up-country, but that, of course, is not relevant here, nor are the miseries of illiterate peasants of as much interest to our own policymaking establishment as are the minor travails of well-spoken students. What is relevant from my experience of that ravishing, thrown-away country was the extensive presence of things Chinese--people, goods, trucks, bootleg videos, take your pick. In Mandalay, ethnic Burmans complained to me that they and their families were being driven into shack settlements outside of the city because the Chinese were buying up the downtown, and the old Burma road, despite its poor condition, now supports an intense traffic of Chinese trucks.

Since my visit, the United States, determined not to compromise on human rights as long as the castigated nation is not a major trading partner (Saudi Arabia, home of ingenious cruelties, is a far greater human rights abuser than Burma, but Burma doesn't have oil), has driven Burma into the arms of drug-money launderers, while advancing China's strategic interests. China reportedly has enjoyed the use of an intelligence listening post along Burma's coast for a decade, and Chinese influence in the commercial arena has expanded notably. Slow off the mark, India is now very concerned. So it built a road that will prove of local benefit, but that cannot begin to alter the strategic shift toward dominant Chinese influence in Burma.

But China has never been an expansionist power, right? Since I'm not a China hand, I long accepted the wisdom of the experts, for whom the past is the pattern of the future. Then, in Burma, with a chopstick load of noodles halfway to my snout, the light finally clicked on: nations can change. As useful as history may be in deepening our understanding, it is not an infallible guide to the challenges of tomorrow. Even as I write these lines, China experts in the United States seek to explain away a U.S. aircrew held hostage (albeit briefly, as these things go) and the impoundment of a U.S. surveillance aircraft that irresponsible actions by a Chinese pilot had crippled. China, so the expert argument goes, has legitimate defensive concerns...there's a power struggle in Beijing...the military slipped its leash...or the military is lying to the political leadership...or the Chinese pilot was tired of being nicknamed "General Tso's Chicken" at the officer's club, et cetera. And all this must be true because China always has been an inward-looking place, never an expansionist power.

But Germany, long militarily aggressive, has turned into a mouse. Imperial Britain is gone, replaced by "Cool Britannia," Europe's leading host country for immigrants. Austria, once the great military defender of the West, is just a tourist cafe where the staff sponges off dead composers. Almost overnight, Portugal went from being a backwater to a globe-spanning imperial power in its heyday. Isolationist America is, like it or not, an indispensable global presence, its military expeditionary in purpose. And burned into China's memory is the speed with

which Japan went from being a reclusive, medieval kingdom to a brutal, insatiable empire. The examples are many of nations decisively shifting their established patterns of behavior. The latest--and most worrying--example is China. The dragon that chased its tail for thousands of years is now breathing fire at its neighbors.

Perhaps it's time to accept that the tide has turned decisively in China. While Beijing long has had local interests on its borders, it now appears determined, over the long-term, to establish hegemony over East Asia, while reaching strategically into South Asia. Just as the Russian desire for warm-water ports fixated European great-power politics for centuries, the future may see a swelling concern with Chinese interest in becoming first a presence, then a power, in the Bay of Bengal and beyond.

It makes perfect sense.

Imagine yourself as a Chinese strategist, looking at the world from Beijing instead of from Washington. Your natural and immediate interest lies to the east: Taiwan, Korea, Japan, oil and gas deposits under the sea... But the United States, a power with no sovereign territory within thousands of miles, frustrates your "natural" rights to dominate, if not occupy, the region, and to profit from your power and position. The United States would look hostile--and your challenge in Beijing would be to limit America's power to interfere with your rise as the dominant regional player.

Every conceivable strategic factor, from military and economic advantages to weather and terrain, would lead you southward, toward the Bay of Bengal and the realms beyond--a distant and very difficult theater for the United States military, which would have to rely upon naval forces deployed in a remote and constricted operational environment far from significant bases or major client states capable of supporting military operations. Neither the U.S. Army or Air Force would be a major factor, at least initially. Strategically, only a conflict in the middle of Central Asia would be a greater challenge for U.S. forces.

But a Chinese strategy directed toward operating in strength where the United States is weakest relies upon preventing a serious rapprochement and subsequent alliance between the United States and India. To the Chinese, India would appear manageable--especially since the conquest of Indian territory (except perhaps, for a few bits and pieces on the border) would not be Beijing's goal. Should relations warm between Washington and New Delhi, we may expect both Chinese complaints and attempts to derail any potential military cooperation.

While any such Indo-American alliance is far away and would rely on New Delhi's reassessment of its liabilities and interests, India on its own lacks the power to deter China, while the United States lacks the strategic depth in-theater to operate effectively in any major conflict in the Bay of Bengal and adjacent waters (not an immediate threat--but a very serious long-term prospect). None of this will occur tomorrow, and the tide of events may prevent it from happening at all. But if I were at work in the long-range-plans shop in Beijing, my twin objectives would be keeping the U.S. occupied in East Asia, while developing my own presence and power on a southerly axis.

Certainly, East Asia will remain China's priority. But an indirect approach to achieving greatly-increased regional influence and authority perfectly suits China's location, capabilities and needs. Finally, China may be relying, rightly or wrongly, on the ethnic and culture affinities of the massive Chinese diaspora throughout the region, lately in Burma, but long-established in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and elsewhere. To Beijing, the northern and eastern littoral of the Bay of Bengal must already look Chinese.

India might want to start building a few more roads.

### *Bloody Kashmir*

So much has been written about Kashmir in recent years that only a crude, brief summary is on offer here, a simple reminder of how we have gotten to where we are. Two points demand to be made up front: First, it is difficult, if not impossible, to envision how the Kashmir problem might be settled peacefully and enduringly, given the fanaticism that has taken root; and, second, the United States, despite its blameworthy part in exacerbating Kashmir's difficulties, should run, duck and hide from any role in mediating or monitoring the multiple disputes involved.

Kashmir never wanted to be a part either of independent India or Pakistan, but it acceded to India as the lesser of two evils--and after some pretty rough arm-twisting. For its part, Pakistan took what it could, too--the overwhelmingly-Muslim high country in western Kashmir. In the new, Hindu-majority India, Kashmiri Muslims became second-class citizens. Discontent was always present, if subdued. Then a regional chain of events ignited the latest--and longest--cycle of violence:

The Islamic world's failure to adapt and compete successfully over the last fifty years ignited a loose international movement of reactionary fundamentalism that, at its most incendiary, destabilized or overthrew governments, establishing Islamic regimes in countries such as Iran and Sudan. And the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. The U.S. supplied arms to anti-Soviet Islamic partisans on a massive scale, embracing the devil to do the work of saints, and employing Pakistan as a conduit, proxy and strategic platform. The Soviet effort failed; Soviet forces withdrew; and the Afghan debacle hastened the end of the Soviet Union.

With the Russians gone, the United States simply walked away from the war-ravaged, refugee-ridden, arms-rich region, leaving a vacuum of interest that empowered the most radical elements among the Islamic partisans, accelerating Pakistan's structural decline, and leaving an excess of religious bigots with guns in search of new missions. "Liberating" all of Kashmir was an obvious next step for the holy warriors. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency, far too clever for the country's good, sought short-term, tactical advantages without considering the long-term strategic effects on Pakistan. Caught between ISI

initiatives and its own more conservative approach to policy, the Pakistani military repeatedly found itself drawn into no-win situations, culminating in the Kargil debacle in which the army was hung out to take the blame for the ISI's mistakes. In Pakistan, the (phenomenally-corrupt) government was overthrown in a last attempt to halt the country's decomposition. Meanwhile, the Islamic freedom fighters and terrorists (both sorts operate in the region and, despite occasional overlaps, they are by no means identical), though initially sponsored by the ISI, now behave independently--often to Pakistan's frustration. The militants tie down a half million Indian military and para-military personnel--but they have also tied down Pakistan, as well. The worst elements in Pakistan opened Pandora's box--and now Pakistan, even moreso than India, is likely to suffer from the unleashed contents. In the current, super-heated atmosphere of religious passions, Pakistan cannot openly or obviously disavow the militants in Kashmir, whether or not it might wish to do so. And Kashmir has turned into India's Northern Ireland, although on a much larger, far more brutal scale.

A few years ago I stood on the Pakistani side of the Line of Control, looking down a long, cold valley into India's portion of Kashmir. A Pakistani brigadier insisted on driving me back from the lookout post in his jeep, packing off his driver and taking the wheel himself so he might speak openly. He was less concerned about the sloppy firing the Indians briefly had directed toward us (just a "Howdy, neighbor," sort of thing, well out of range) than he was with the poverty all around us. "We can't go on like this," he told me, and I believe he was sincere, "neither us nor the Indians. We can't afford it. Look at this," he said as we drove through a grim village one bend in the road back from the border's gun emplacements. "And all the money goes on the military." He didn't pitch the Pakistani side's case, or attack the Indians, but spoke with a wounded dignity, frustrated that he could see no end in sight to a problem harming all concerned. I suspect he has like-minded counterparts on the Indian side. Only the hardened few on both sides want this struggle to continue. But, too often, those hardened few determine the fate of nations.

Meanwhile, Kashmir is going backward. Hindu refugees have fled southward. Hindu, Muslim and Sikh villagers who remained behind are massacred, and it is usually unclear who the perpetrators are--the Indians accuse one faction or another of the militants, while the militants and a growing network of conspiracy theorists accuse the Indian police or military of trying to discredit the Islamic warriors by staging slaughters of their own people. Perhaps the most beautiful state in India and long a tourist magnet, Kashmir is now in a daily state of siege. While the average resident, no matter his or her faith, just wants to get on with life, the savagery has cut so deep, and the hardcore actors on every side are so embittered, that any potential solution, from plebiscites to a scorched-earth military campaign, will leave significant elements unsatisfied. No compromise with the Islamic militants would ever go far enough--the hardcore killers want the kingdom of God on earth, and nothing less--while any (unlikely) withdrawal by India would kindle violent outbreaks of Hindu fanaticism throughout much of the country, pogroms against India's Muslims, and, just possibly, this huge democracy's first coup.

The United States bears a noteworthy share of the responsibility for the situation in Kashmir. Yet, the good offices of the United States could not, under any circumstances, bring about a solution that would suit all of the major (let alone the fanatical minor) players. And given the local psychology, the U.S. would rapidly find itself blamed by all sides for any further negative developments in the situation. We might improve our approach to Pakistan itself (the military is the only remotely-honest organization in the country, whether the democracy-cures-all-ills crowd believes it or not), but we must not touch the Kashmir issue.

Even if some UN or other third-party mediator blessed with genius or touched by the hand of God were to bring all the major players into agreement and produce that great totem of diplomacy, a peace treaty, the United States should not offer a single peacekeeper, policeman or monitor. Send money, not people. In Kashmir, any American personnel would automatically become the targets of choice for die-hard militants; U.S. soldiers cannot behave with the harshness necessary to the social environment; and any peacekeeping effort in Kashmir (to which the Indians would, in any case, be extremely unlikely to agree, since they view Kashmir as irrevocably their sovereign territory) would be open-ended, to say the least.

If a solution is to be found, it must be found locally. Period.

### *Welcome to the Security Council?*

Should India, the world's largest democracy with the world's second-largest population be given a seat on the United Nations Security Council?

Absolutely not.

While India may be more deserving, morally, of a seat than China, or more deserving in terms of practical importance than France, or better-suited in every respect, other than the size of its nuclear arsenal, than Russia, the fact is we're stuck with Russia, France and China on the Security Council, and adding more ill-suited members can only make things worse for the United States and the world. In any case, were we, unwisely, to support an expansion of the council, Brazil would have a far better claim on a seat than India, and any reorganization would have to substitute a European Union seat for the one presently held by France alone (this last proposition is, perhaps, the best gambit the U.S. could toss out to prevent change, since France and Russia would oppose the introduction of a German-influenced EU seat on the council).

As an aside, the UN, just as it is, supports American purposes wonderfully, without possessing the organizational coherence to frustrate us seriously (does Capitol Hill really want a more efficient and effective UN? Be careful what you wish for). It is in our interests not only to let the current structure of the UN alone, but to turn a blind eye to a certain level of corruption, which keeps Third World diplomats focused on their personal welfare and hinders them from unifying in opposition to U.S. priorities (I hate to suggest tolerating corruption anywhere, but

the UN is a valuable trap for potential troublemakers from under-developed states). A sloppy UN, marginally capable of doing that which truly must be done in the world, is exactly the UN we need.

It is certainly possible that, in the out-years, India will come to deserve a seat on the Security Council--or on some other board that may supercede it, as globalization continues to reconstruct so many aspects of our world. But New Delhi first must learn more about the world. It must move beyond reflexive rhetoric to a better understanding of economics, diplomacy, information and the dynamics of change. India must take its own fine constitution seriously, and it must wage war internally against corruption and de facto, if not de jure, prejudice. At present, India is (almost) morally inert--and this internal debility leads to non-competitive behaviors, which, always, always, always, seem to lead to another bout of worn-out, anti-Americanism.

If India wants to be taken seriously as a global actor, it must stop relying on the size of its population as its justification and learn honesty in its deeds and ethics in its behavior. I realize, of course, that Indians reading this will sputter, turn purple, and rant about the dishonesty of the United States, its lack of ethics, and so on. Which only proves my point: Indians still cannot look honestly at themselves or their country. Surely, the United States is imperfect. But India trails so far behind that the gap is immeasurable. Also, it is much easier to criticize from a situation of impotence and few responsibilities than it is to be the United States, with global responsibilities thrust upon us.

We may hope that the day will come when India merits a seat on the UN Security Council, but that day appears sadly far away.

## **5. DRAFTER'S REMARKS**

I intended this report to be significantly shorter. But India is endless. As I close the document, I am all too aware of the issues I have not addressed. The effect of AIDS on India may prove very severe, indeed, given the state's paucity of resources and the struggles of the health care system under even routine conditions. Water shortages need far more attention than I have been able to pay them. The potential long-term effects of the Indian diaspora on the mother country deserves a study in itself--I believe that, if anyone sparks change in India, it will be those Indians with experience of the greater world. The complex inner workings of India's government must be better understood by U.S. policymakers. The much-studied nuclear issue remains opaque to us. I have dealt only peripherally, and certainly inadequately, with India's minorities. Doubtless, I have failed to credit many of independent India's achievements, while likely missing other looming problems. I can only say that I have done the best I could. The rest is up to others.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

--India is a potential ally of the first order for the United States, and we should welcome the development of closer ties; however, we must allow India to set the pace in the diplomatic and military spheres. We should respond generously when it makes sense, but must avoid pushing for too much too fast--or appearing to smother India in our embrace. India must come to realize the importance of the U.S. to its future on its own, and must develop an urgent appetite for an alliance. Above all, we must go very slowly on any potential military cooperation, which could easily backfire. Despite our predictable temptation to "engage" militarily, this is the one area where we should stick to flirting for a few more years. We can afford to be patient, and quiet patience is the best policy toward today's India.

--In the economic sphere, however, we must be prepared to stand our ground. As long as U.S.-based multinational corporations deal legally and legitimately with India, we should defend their legal rights and interests. When the Indians cheat, there must be penalties. We need not trumpet our actions publicly, but should work vigorously behind the scenes to force India to comply with the rules of the global marketplace. India must learn that it is subject to global rules and international law, not an exception to them. Tolerance for corruption or unjustified contract abrogation runs against the long-term interests of both our countries.

--As India globalizes we should support (within reason) India's requests for special treatment of its agricultural sector. Mishandled, this could create severe social and political dislocations within India.

--Unless it becomes truly unavoidable, the United States should avoid public confrontations with India or the vocal airing of differences. Indians like to make grand, self-justifying statements. Ignore them. Let Indians have their pride, even arrogance, until they themselves realize the cost. Act quietly and firmly, behind the scenes, whether the issue is a seat on the UN Security Council or just another rant about neo-colonialism.

--Make it easier for well-educated young Indians to receive H-1B work visas to the United States, to become permanent residents, and, finally, to become citizens. These talented, hardworking people are a free gift, and we should welcome them with open arms.

--U.S. planners need to intensify--quietly--their scrutiny of long-term Chinese prospects in south Asia, especially on the littoral of the Bay of Bengal and adjacent waters. Without raising alarms, U.S. diplomats and military planners need to

prepare to establish a U.S. military presence and robust combat capabilities in the region in the out-years.

--The U.S. should establish a generous program to bring Indian legislators and key bureaucrats to North America for educational vacations. Indian lack of perspective is a fundamental impediment to progress. Influential Indians within the political system need to see the United States for themselves--not for the purpose of being lectured to by Hill staffers, but to experience America's wealth, strategic depth and diversity. They should see, for example, agribusiness in the Midwest, post-modern development in Austin, Texas, key universities, the interstate highway system, small towns and, of course, Manhattan and Silicon Valley. While the U.S. could not establish a formal government program for this purpose without exciting the jealousy of other nations, a foundation or even private Indian-American sponsors might underwrite and run the effort. Finally, the program should concentrate on bringing in influential Indians working in government--ignoring reputations for corruption in this instance. The corrupt, especially, need to see the potential of rule-of-law globalization if they are to stop blocking India's progress.

--The United States should avoid any involvement, whatsoever, in the Kashmir problem.

--The United States should take a sustained, *indirect* approach to establishing common ground with India by looking for ways to support New Delhi's legitimate interests in the region and the world. For example, the U.S. should be on the lookout for instances of ethnic violence against emigre Indians in third countries and should condemn such events publicly--despite inevitable objections from U.S. businesses engaged in the offending countries and from desk officers who see their own subject country as more important than anything else.

--Should India continue to buy arms from the Russian Federation, we should not object. It will be India's loss. This is yet another issue the Indians must figure out for themselves. Meanwhile, the purchase of Russian-built weapons is a very effective disarmament program, as proven by the low readiness rates of India's air force.

--Without approving of India's nuclear-weapons program, we should treat the issue with less alarm and more sobriety. Confrontation not only will not work, but is counterproductive when it comes up against the Indian temperament. Also, given India's legitimate security concerns today and, especially, tomorrow, we should try to view the situation from New Delhi's perspective. China looks bigger and meaner (and richer) every day. Pakistan might be taken over, in all or in part, by very extreme religious fanatics, or the nuclear neighbor could break up. If we were living in India's neighborhood, we would want nukes, too. Yes, a nuclear exchange is likelier on the sub-continent than anywhere else in the world--but we should concentrate on crisis management, not on the impossible task of trying to persuade India not to defend itself any way it can. And, in this paradoxical world,

a nuclear exchange between India and Pakistan might, through the horrors inflicted, strengthen deterrence elsewhere--although it could only deepen the hatred between India and Pakistan (and, should India get the better of it, between India and the Islamic world as a whole).

--When India violates the human rights of its own people, or violates the provisions of its own constitution to the detriment of its population, we should speak out forthrightly. No potential alliance is worth a return to the perversion of our values that occurred during the Cold War, and a respect for human rights is *always* the best policy in the long run.

*This report was completed on May 1st, 2001.*

*Ralph Peters is a writer and a former soldier. He is indebted to the Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities (CETO) for supporting the research and travel required for this report; however, the views expressed in this document are entirely his own and do not reflect the views of CETO or of any U.S. government or private organization.*